RUBIN

2025

Spiral

Interdependence

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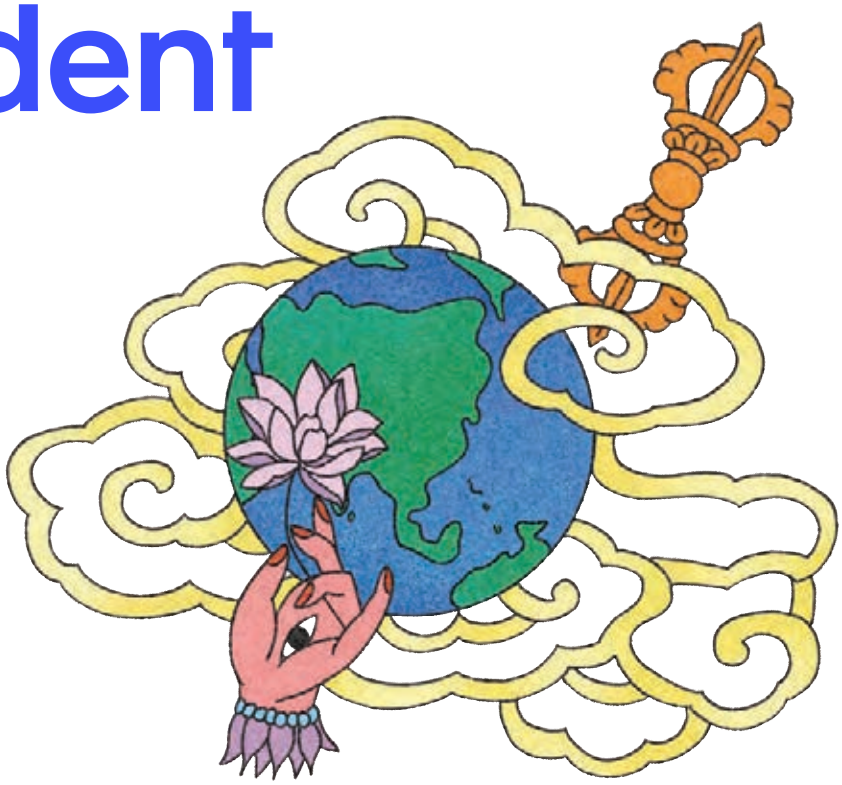
About the Cover
The design draws inspiration from the intricate, interconnected networks inherent in nature. These include the complex structures of mycelial fungi, root systems, plant creepers, tessellations, and organic patterns that epitomize symbiosis. By referencing these natural systems, the artist seeks to evoke the profound interrelations and mutual dependencies that exist between humans and their environments, emphasizing the ecological and relational dynamics that underpin the theme of interdependence.

About the Cover Artist
Osheen Siva is a multidisciplinary artist, originally from Thiruvannamalai and currently based in Goa, India, who engages with themes of identity, futurism, and resistance through the prisms of surrealism, speculative fiction, and science fiction. Grounded in their Dalit and Tamil heritage, Siva envisions transformative narratives of decolonized dreamscapes, futuristic oases, and empowered queer and feminine identities, often inhabited by mutants and mythical beings. Their diverse practice spans immersive media, installation, performance art, public art, and digital illustration. See their work @osheen.siva and osheensiva.com

Opposite page illustration by Sargam Gupta

Dependent Arising



The Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art is embracing interdependence—the mutual dependence of everything and every experience—in our new form as a global museum, as we pursue a wide array of initiatives that aim to give rise to the worldwide appreciation of Himalayan art.

Since closing the doors of our New York City galleries last year, we've opened new doors to new experiences and initiatives locally, nationally, and internationally. This exciting next phase is a continuation and evolution of our mission, motivated by the drive to innovate and advance museum work in the twenty-first century.

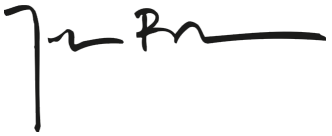
Operating under a new name and with a refreshed visual identity, the Rubin is creating a global web of projects and partnerships that foster greater understanding of Himalayan art, complete with a new website that features opportunities for close looking and deep exploration of objects from the collection and the stories inspired by them.

Ongoing initiatives, such as the traveling Mandala Lab (shown in Bilbao, London, and Milan so far) have paved the way for the Museum's transformation to a globally operating institution. Project Himalayan Art—encompassing a digital platform, publication, and traveling exhibition (shown at four venues with twelve more being planned)—focuses on the cross-cultural exchange of Tibetan, Himalayan, and Inner Asian art and cultures and supports the inclusion of Himalayan art into humanities and liberal arts curricula.

Other projects this year include an educational partnership with museum colleagues in Bhutan; the launch of the fifth season of the Museum's Webby-Honoree podcast, AWAKEN; the second award of the annual Rubin Himalayan Art Prize and grants to support art and research initiatives promoting the rich cultural legacy and living traditions of Himalayan regions; and a collection sharing program that aims to expand the representation of and access to Himalayan art in other museums.

We are global, yes, but also continue to serve New York City with our popular weekly in-person Mindfulness Meditation sessions at New York Insight Meditation Center and an annual distinguished lecture series at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This summer we will unveil a new public artwork by Nepalese artist IMAGINE (a.k.a. Sneha Shrestha) at Diversity Plaza in Jackson Heights in collaboration with the New York City Department of Transportation Art Program. We're cultivating the self-awareness and emotional resilience skills of K–12 students by bringing Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning® practices to classrooms. And our beloved Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room installation will shine in Brooklyn as part of a six-year partnership with the Brooklyn Museum.

Spiral is here to act as your guide to all things Rubin as we engage with the theme of interdependence this year, exploring this concept from the perspectives of a Buddhist nun, social scientist, astrologer, esteemed children's book author, and others. We hope you find valuable insights in their stories and join us as we discover how interdependence connects us all.



Jorrit Britschgi
Executive Director
Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art

Sargam Gupta is an Indian artist and creative director whose work blends everyday moments with playful surrealism. Based in New York City, Sargam pushes the boundaries of reality in her art, nudging it ever so slightly to reveal a world where the impossible feels possible. She has collaborated with the *New York Times*, *Vox*, Uber, and Apple. Sargam created the illustrations in this issue for the short fiction series "Blood Ties." See her work at @stopthisgupta

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Howard Kaplan is an editor and writer who helped found *Spiral* magazine in 2017. He currently works at the Smithsonian and divides his time between Washington, DC, and New York City.

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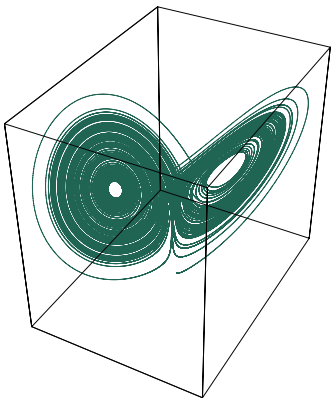

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Mimi Mondal was born and raised in Kolkata, India. Her fiction has twice been nominated for the Nebula Award. As the coeditor of the nonfiction anthology *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*, Mimi received the Locus Award and nominations for the Hugo and British Fantasy Awards.

Read more stories in this series over the course of the year at rubinmuseum.org/spiral

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CAUSES AND CONDITIONS

The universal law of dependent origination provides a road map out of suffering

by **Bhante Gunaratana** and **Veronique Ziegler**

Suffering does not arise independently. It arises based on certain conditions, and when those conditions are eliminated, it ceases. This, in short, is the teaching of dependent origination, and it leads to the complete elimination of ignorance, the cause of suffering. As long as ignorance is there, suffering is there. As long as greed, hatred, and delusion are there, suffering is there. If you want to get rid of your suffering, remove greed, hatred, and delusion from your mind.

The Buddha's teachings guide us to study ourselves in the minutest detail to understand accurately what is going on within us. Studying dependent origination leads us to self-exploration, to observing within our own body and mind the dependent arising and dependent ceasing of our psychosomatic responses to our experiences in the world. It is very applicable to our daily lives, but what exactly does

the term *dependent* mean? When asked, for instance, if it is going to rain today, we would answer, "It depends." But universal causation states that everything has a cause and an effect produced by that cause, and therefore the arising of one thing (the effect) depends upon the arising of another thing (the cause). And conversely if the cause does not arise, the effect also cannot arise. According to Buddhist scriptures, while sitting under the Bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha investigated the cause of suffering and saw how suffering arises and the way leading to its complete cessation. In the first watch of the night, he saw the sequences of causes and conditions leading to suffering, in the second watch the causes and conditions leading to the cessation of suffering, and in the third watch the ascending and descending order of the causes and conditions.

The general belief during the Buddha's lifetime, just as today, was that suffering just happened by accident or that it was created by oneself, others, or a combination of these. But dependent origination demonstrates that everything is conditioned, that nothing comes into existence independently, without causes and conditions. *Conditioned* means that the existence of whatever is observed, felt, experienced, and inferred depends upon another thing and that everything is interdependent and interconnected. The very word *conditioned* implies the dependent origination formula, which presents the causes and conditions leading from the root cause of suffering to its manifestation in twelve steps, connected by eleven links.

However, merely memorizing these twelve steps is neither knowing nor understanding dependent origination. It is a deep, elaborate, and comprehensive teaching that leads us to a profound understanding of ourselves and ultimately a state of absolute inner peace and serenity. In the broadest sense it applies to anything in the universe, for everything exists depending on something else: the formation of the earth is due to the formation of clumps of rocks from swirling gas and dust brought together by the force of gravity. No system in the universe can exist by itself but rather in dependence on other systems and natural phenomena that themselves occur based on natural causes and conditions. Dependent origination is a universal law that applies to nature as a whole.

The formula of dependent origination presents a causal relationship of origination and is presented following a forward order, a backward order, and a combination of both forward and backward orders.

In the forward order, the formula is "This being, this is; from the arising of this, this arises." Note that the formula states *this* and not *that*, because *this* is what is happening now, in this present moment. It refers to what is happening at this very instant in our own body and mind. Understanding the distinction between *this* and *that* in the formula is of the utmost importance. *This* indicates a thing or a situation that is close, in the present moment, while *that* points to something that is farther away or out there in some future time. *This* is all right here and right now.

We can observe the dependent origination formula at any time within ourselves. Take the example of anger. When we are angry, how do we feel? We get all hot and bothered, don't we? It happens right now, doesn't it? It is not something out there in a different time and place, where you get angry one day and then wake up the next morning agitated. Our bodies respond to anger right away: when anger rises, so does our blood pressure. From the arising of this, this arises.

In the reverse order, the formula is "This not being, this is not; from the ceasing of this, this ceases." This order presents the sequence leading to the ultimate destruction of ignorance and as a result the total liberation from suffering.

One should examine all this for oneself. Just watch what happens to desire. Watch it arising and slowly fading away. Then, the second obstacle comes: discontent and dissatisfaction with the practice. This comes and slowly fades away, too. Hunger and thirst come and fade away. And then cravings arise and fade away, first for sense pleasures, which are pleasures enjoyed through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. When this vanishes, this vanishes. Not one single aspect of this dependent origination stays the same. So, in short, what the Buddha saw is rising and falling—that is, impermanence.

From *Dependent Origination in Plain English* by Bhante Gunaratana and Veronique Ziegler, ©2024 by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana. Reprinted by permission of Wisdom Publications, wisdom.org

Bhante Gunaratana was ordained at the age of twelve as a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka, earned his PhD in philosophy from The American University, and has led meditation retreats, taught Buddhism, and lectured widely throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. He is the president of the Bhavana Society in High View, West Virginia, where he lives.

Veronique Ziegler earned her doctorate degree in experimental high-energy physics from the University of Iowa working on the BaBar experiment at SLAC National Laboratory in Menlo Park, California. She then took a research assistant position at the same lab and later a staff scientist position at Jefferson National Laboratory in Newport News, Virginia, where she currently works full time and is involved in the lab particle spectroscopy experimental program. In 2018, she started attending Bhante Gunaratana's Dhamma classes. She has been an avid Dhamma student ever since.

Yeshi Pelden developed a passion for art while assisting his uncle, a painter, during a winter vacation. Inspired by this experience, he joined the National Institute for Zorig Chusum (NIZC) in Thimhpu, Bhutan, where he learned from esteemed teachers such as Tshewang Tenzin. He served as the student leader and was awarded the Best Outgoing Student medal in 2014. Yeshi is now a painting instructor at NIZC, which is dedicated to preserving and promoting Bhutan's traditional arts and cultural heritage. See his work @yeshipaldhen

Previous page illustration by Yeshi Pelden

A Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Comes to Brooklyn

Building a bridge between two boroughs

by **Howard Kaplan**

Installed in 2015, the Rubin's Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room was one of the quiet wonders of the Museum, delighting guests who alighted from the spiral staircase and entered a room that enveloped the senses. Composed of more than one hundred artworks and ritual pieces, it was filled with elaborate scroll paintings (thangkas), historic implements made of wood and precious metals, and musical instruments arranged on traditional Tibetan furniture. The objects welcomed careful looking in a space that offered visitors places to sit for relaxation and contemplation. The lighting was low, but the experience was transformative. A recording of the soft chanting of Tibetan nuns or monks added to the uniqueness of the environment. "From the very start, the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room has been the most loved space at the Rubin Museum for providing a glimpse into how Tibetan religious art would be displayed and used as a part of the living cultural tradition and practice," says Elena Pakhoutova, curator of Himalayan art at the Rubin.

After ten years as one of the Rubin's most popular installations, the Shrine Room will soon take on a new life as part of the Museum's transformation into a globally operating model. The Shrine Room will cross the river and, beginning in June, be on view at the Brooklyn Museum for six years as part of a larger collaboration between the two institutions. According to Pakhoutova, "It will be presented in a wider context of other Asian artistic traditions, Buddhist culture, and global and local contemporary art, making it accessible to more visitors and diverse communities."

The installation will enhance the Brooklyn Museum's important collections of Asian art, which were fully reimagined in a major gallery renovation that was unveiled gradually from 2017 to 2023. In addition to loaning the installation, Rubin curators will be on hand to switch out the objects to create new experiences for visitors. "The Rubin Museum Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room has been a renowned and beloved cultural experience for people around the world," says Anne Pasternak, Shelby White and Leon Levy Director of the Brooklyn Museum, "and we couldn't be more excited to host it at the Brooklyn Museum."

RUBIN

Take a closer look at the Shrine Room with a curator-led video at rubinmuseum.org/shrine-up-close

Photo by Dave de Armas

THINGS DEPEND ON OTHER THINGS

Applying the teachings of interdependence to day-to-day life

Venerable Thubten Chodron

interviewed by Sarah Zabrodski

Sarah Zabrodski: How would you define interdependence in a Buddhist context?

Venerable Thubten Chodron: Interdependence is the meaning of what we call dependent arising in Buddhism. The basic idea is that things depend on other things. Not only do results depend on their causes, but something becomes a result in dependence on there being a cause. Causal dependence is the seed growing into a plant. Mutual dependence is that the plant is called a result in dependence on there being a cause that produced it. Dependent arising is a strong theme throughout Buddhist teachings.

Could you tell us a bit about how dependent arising, which has the same meaning as interdependence, applies to both conventional life and the ultimate nature of things?

Conventional existence includes the people, objects, and environment that we encounter in our lives. The ultimate nature is how phenomena actually exist. How do they exist? They lack any kind of independent nature, a nature that is self-instituting. For example, when we think "I," the self appears to exist independent of causes and conditions. It seems to be something independent of the body and mind on which it depends. Think about it—do you feel like you exist simply because the causes for you exist? No, it feels like

there is an "I" that exists independently. Yet the more we understand dependence, the more we understand that everything, including "I," is empty of independent or inherent existence.

Every object has a conventional nature and an ultimate nature. The apple's conventional nature is it grows on a tree, decays or is eaten, becomes part of a body or the earth, etc. Its ultimate nature is that it is impermanent and lacks inherent existence. The apple being dependent and the apple being empty of independent existence are complementary.

That is a difficult point to understand, because when people understand things lack inherent existence, if they don't understand dependent arising, they easily go to the extreme of saying nothing exists at all. But when they see that things do exist, then the mind goes to the other extreme and grasps things as inherently existent. We bounce back and forth between absolutism (inherent existence) and nihilism. However, astute meditators with deep realization know that dependent arising and the emptiness of inherent existence are mutually complementary. Things arise dependently because they are empty. Things are empty because they arise dependently. These two go together.

How do we see interdependence reflected in Buddhist art?

Let's take the mandala of Avalokiteshvara, the buddha of compassion [pictured on the previous page]. The mandala represents the environment and Avalokiteshvara is the deity who inhabits it. In Buddhism, that is called the support and the supported. The environment is the support. What does it support? Avalokiteshvara, who is the supported.

What is the relationship between interdependence and compassion and how we relate to other living beings?

The Buddha taught steps to follow to generate compassion. That is causal dependence. Tibetan Buddhism describes two methods to generate *bodhicitta*, the aspiration to become a buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings. One is the seven-point cause-and-effect instruction, and the second is equalizing and exchanging self and others. When we do these meditations, our attitude toward other beings changes. Two points are especially important: we see other living beings as kind, and we see them as subjected to suffering in cyclic existence. Contemplating this awakens us to the fact that our entire lives depend on the kindness of others, and we want to benefit them.

Can we see this interdependence—and by extension compassion—even in the seemingly mundane?

I'm talking to you by seeing you on a computer screen. How many living beings were involved in the creation of this computer? There are so many parts that came from different countries. Some parts came from under the earth. The computer depends on the miners who extracted these minerals, the people who designed the computer, the people who assembled, packaged, and transported it, and many others. The opportunity to talk to each other on opposite sides of the country is dependent on their kindness.

What about the fact that their kindness wasn't specifically directed toward us, or it may not have involved a feeling of kindness in them at all?

It doesn't matter whether somebody does it especially for me and you. The bottom line is they put their life energy into it and we benefit.

How does interdependence relate to karma?

Karma means action. The law of karma and its effects is an ethical system of cause and effect. Our physical, verbal, and mental actions affect our future experiences. The most important part of any action is the motivation. To put it simply, actions done with kindness bring happiness; actions done with nonvirtuous intentions bring suffering. When we understand karma, we stop blaming our problems and unhappiness on others and instead take responsibility for our actions, knowing that they are the principal cause of our misery. This knowledge gives us the power to change our future by changing our present actions.

What lessons can we apply to how we treat our environment?

Every living being depends on their environment. If we have compassion for living beings, we must care for the environment that we all depend on. Climate change and pollution in the environment are related to wealth inequality, which causes people to fall ill and creates social unrest. So caring for the environment is important. Happiness and peace depend not only on the environment but also on social structures, politics, and so forth.

How can we put interdependence into action?

The Dalai Lama says if you want to be selfish, be wisely selfish and take care of others. If we take care of others and help others, we'll live with happy people and we'll be happier. If we're stingy and arrogant, others will be miserable, and we'll live with unhappy people. Unhappy people don't stay quiet. Those who are impoverished will steal. Whose possessions will they take? Those of the wealthy, who live surrounded by impoverished, unhappy, angry people. In short, we're all in this together. We are interdependent. The more we can understand this, the more we will happily work for the welfare of all and live in a happier society.

Venerable Thubten Chodron is an American Buddhist nun and the founder and abbess of Sravasti Abbey. Ordained in 1977, she is a student of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan masters. She has authored many books on Buddhism and assisted His Holiness the Dalai Lama with the writing and publication of *The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*. Visit thubtenchodron.org for a library of her teachings and sravastiabbey.org to learn about the Abbey.

Sarah Zabrodski is the senior editor and publications manager at the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art.

Mandala of Eleven-Headed Avalokiteshvara; Tibet; 19th century; pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art; gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation; F1997.19.6 (HAR 596)

Opposite page illustration by Sargam Gupta

Sanju

by **Mimi Mondal**

Word on the UofM–Briarwood campus is that vampires are squatting in the wrecked old town hall building, just as the students return from spring break. It infuriates P. R. Sanju, professor at the School of International Studies. How did they decide it's vampires and not regular squatters? Everyone has heard the story, but everyone's heard it from someone else.

Vampires, like serial killers and school shooters, are a slice of classic Americana. The concept may not have originated on this land, but what else of America has? Tensions are building on campus—two African American janitors and a visiting professor from Vietnam were accosted by enraged students. Today Sanju reconvened his Guardian Angels program, where volunteers accompany members of vulnerable groups on walks through the campus.

"I'll call someone for you, Prof?" Liz, the new admin assistant, had offered as he was clocking out. "It'll get dark on your way."

Sanju remembers her from his undergrad class some years ago. Not the best student but caring, meticulous, twinkle in her eye. Doubtless she knows that Sanju walks home to town from the university.

"No vampire repellent beats this SJW smell, dincha know?" he'd chuckled. "See you tomorrow, Liz!"

Now, as he turns into Sotheby Street, Sanju regrets his overconfidence. On lengthening spring evenings this tree-lined neighborhood bustles with residents, but today the houses resemble rows of tombs in the dusk. He feels his pocket for the silver-plated knife that arrived from Amazon yesterday.

Something comes running down a driveway and hits the sidewalk—what was that?! Sanju deflates to realize it's a little girl—yellow cardigan over a dress, hair in two puffs tied with little yellow bows.

Sanju's life has been a relentless battle against racism, but nothing tells him this particular child can't be a vampire. If you believe in vampires, that . . . *condition* doesn't discriminate in transmission. Not another soul is outside on Sotheby Street.

Damn. That's gonna suck for more than just her.

With a giggle the girl stops, not five feet from him.

Now does she go for my throat?

"Halima—no!"

A woman in a printed abaya and headscarf emerges from the driveway. She emits a string of hurried words that he recognizes but doesn't understand.

Sanju exhales.

"I'm safe," he voices as the woman crouches up to her daughter. "I'm a professor. Up at the university."

She eyes him warily. "We just going home. We don't want trouble."

"You must've heard—"

"We haven't seen vampire!" she howls. "Our people not vampire! We honest immigrants!"

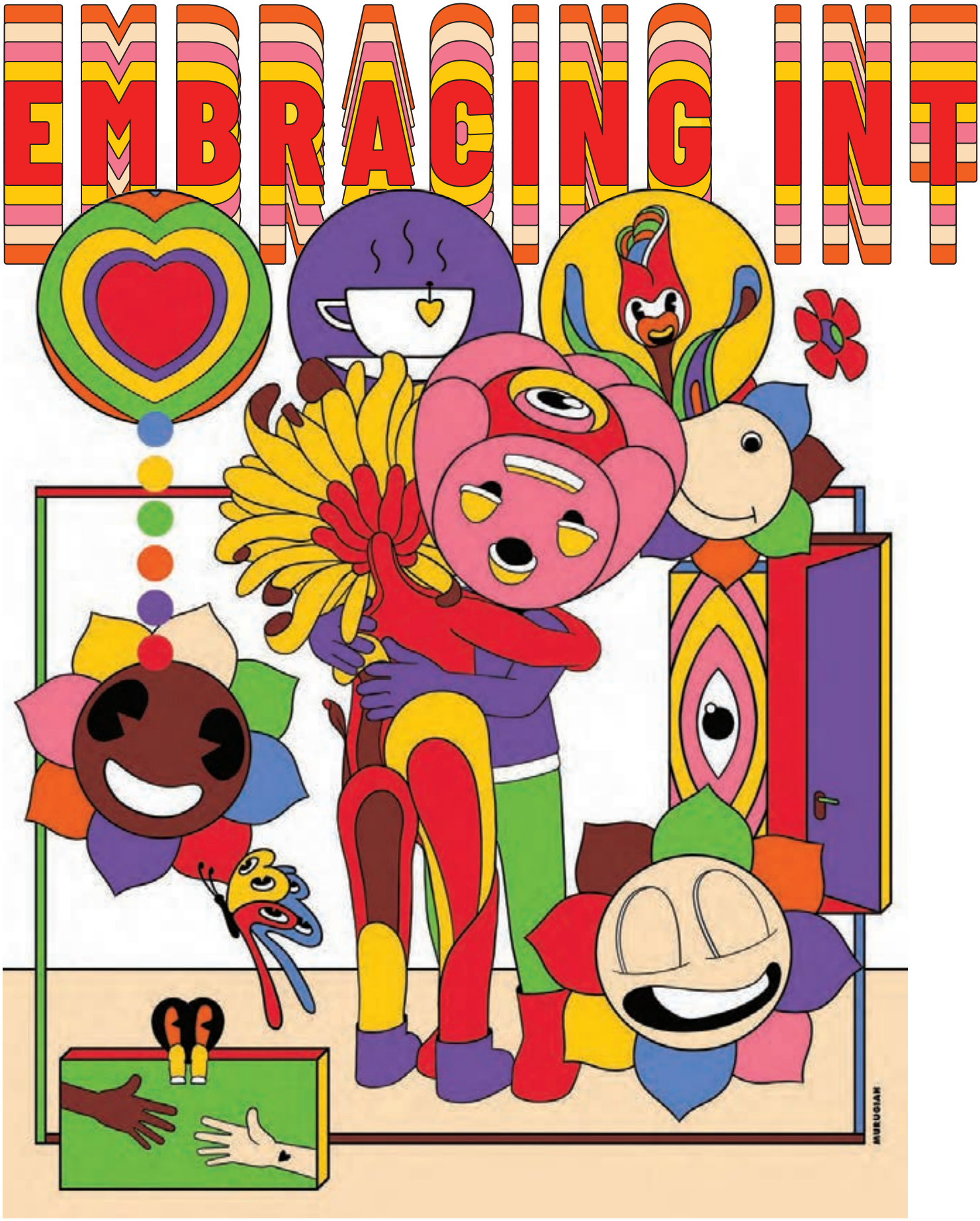
"I meant I could walk you two home," he says in his softest tone.

The woman squints at his face under the streetlight. "You not a man."

If anyone else said that on campus they'd taste Sanju's wrath, but he bites his tongue as her jaw unclenches. For this woman, "not-man" means safe. Vampires might be more preferable to her than walking after dark with an unknown man.

He smiles as she gives him a small nod. "Let's go."

Read more stories in this series over the course of the year at rubinmuseum.org/spiral



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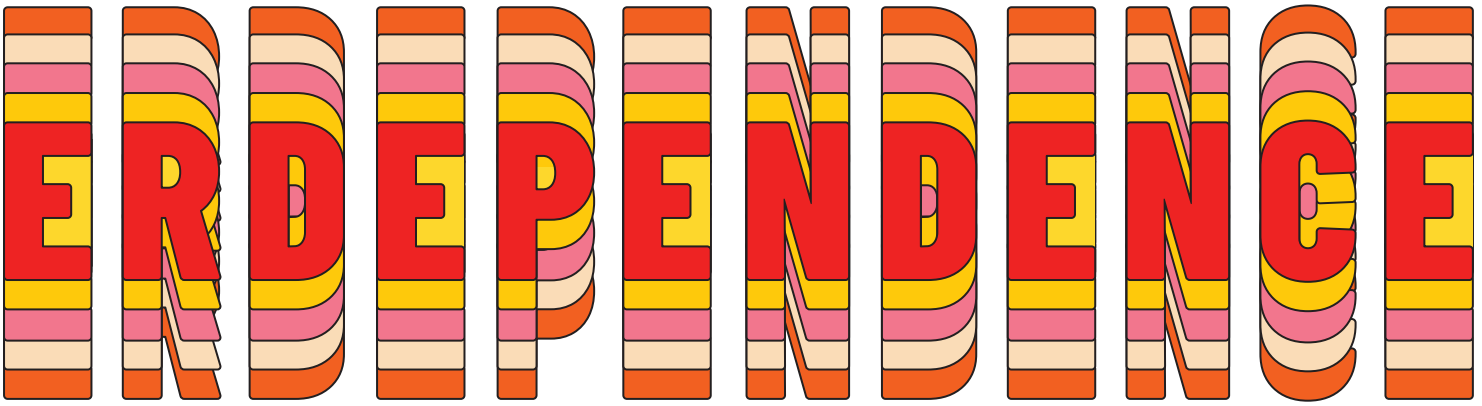


For all people, self-sufficiency is a myth

by **Devrupa Rakshit**

I still remember the day I ordered ice online for the first time.

It sounds absurd, right? Who orders ice when you can just freeze it at home? But as a disabled person living with multiple chronic illnesses, I don't always have the luxury of spare "spoons"—a metaphor within the disabled community for the limited energy reserves most of us live with. Add to that the relentless grip of executive dysfunction, and you've got yourself a combination that can make even the simplest tasks feel insurmountable. So . . . I ordered ice.

But when this came up in conversations with my neurotypical, able-bodied friends, I could see them struggling to disguise their almost-instinctive judgment as curiosity: "*Interesting. Why couldn't you freeze some yourself? Is your freezer out of order?*"

This seemingly innocuous question is rooted in a broader societal issue—the unnecessary glorification of independence. For disabled people like me, this glorification is more than just a cultural quirk. It's a form of ableism that marginalizes our experiences and erodes our sense of self-worth.

In our society independence is often seen as the ultimate goal, a marker of success, maturity, and self-sufficiency. The expectation is clear: overcome your limitations and strive for independence in every aspect of life, from earning a livelihood to living alone. But this one-size-fits-all standard fails to consider the individual realities of people who simply can't meet these expectations without significant harm to their mental and physical health.

Having grown up conditioned by these expectations, the pressure to be independent isn't just external—we internalize it. We absorb these messages and push ourselves to the brink of burnout trying to meet them. I've experienced this firsthand. There have been days when I've attempted to tackle basic household tasks while managing a full-time job and taking care of a cat—like my able-bodied, neurotypical friends—only to be completely wiped out, unable to do anything for the rest of the day.

My partner—who is also diagnosed with ADHD—faces similar struggles.

Together we've had to accept that we can't always do it all, and that's okay. But it took both of us a lot of time—nearly three decades—to get there, and we're not even fully there yet. We're merely works in inconsistent progress. It's a lesson that's hard to hold on to in a world that constantly tells us if we're not independent, we're basically "good-for-nothing losers."

In 2012, Lydia X. Z. Brown, an autistic disability rights activist, wrote, "It is presumed on our behalf that the goal for our lives should be as much independence as possible with as few supports as possible, including accommodations and services."

More than a decade later, even in the aftermath of a pandemic, things haven't changed much. A couple years ago, a disabled man living with spastic diplegia cerebral palsy recounted to me his tryst with the notion of independence as a universal goal. "I have even received forwarded WhatsApp videos from my father, which have

True independence is about having the freedom to make choices about how to live, including the choice to ask for help when needed.

'inspiration porn,'" he said, "with him adding that even I should try to be independent as much as possible."

This glorification of independence is not just harmful to disabled people—it's also fundamentally flawed. Human beings are, by nature, interdependent. Yet in this single-minded obsession with independence, many fail to recognize that independence is not synonymous with self-sufficiency. True independence is about having the freedom to make choices about how to live, including the choice to ask for help when needed. This is where the concept of interdependence comes in.

Interdependence—far from being a radical or new concept—is deeply rooted in the human experience. It acknowledges that we all rely on one another in various ways and that this reliance is not a sign of weakness but a fundamental aspect of being human. We have always thrived in communities, relying on one another for support, cooperation, and survival. This isn't weakness. It's the foundation of human civilization.

In a world that idolizes hyper-independence, it's easy to forget how much we *already* depend on others. Consider the simple act of brewing a cup of tea in the morning. It's something my partner and I rarely have the spoons to do, and people with no real understanding of our struggles have shamed us for ordering tea instead.

To those people, I'd like to ask, do you grow your own tea leaves? Let me guess, probably *not*. You rely on farmers, distributors, and retailers to enable you to blissfully nurse that warm cup of tea in your hands and sip it as you listen to bird sounds emanating from trees that you probably didn't plant yourself either.

The same goes for countless other aspects of daily life. Yet because these forms of interdependence are normalized by society, they go unnoticed. In contrast, when disabled people—especially those with invisible disabilities—seek accommodations and support, it's often seen as a burden and equated with a failure to achieve independence.

This double standard is not only unjust but also perpetuates the stigma surrounding disability.

When we embrace interdependence fully, we create a society that values all its members, not just those who fit the mold of independence. This shift in perspective can have profound implications since, believe it or not, hyper-independence isn't just ableist, it's also a trauma response arising from a place of fear, from the need to protect oneself by refusing help and taking on more than one can handle. Unsurprisingly, this leads to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and burnout among disabled and able-bodied folks alike.

In my life, the sunflower lanyard—officially described as "a discreet sign that the wearer has a hidden disability and may need additional support"—is a symbol of the interdependence I'm striving for. When I put it on for the first time at the Bengaluru airport, a sense of liberation from the ideal of independence washed over me.

For the first time, I felt empowered to ask for help without the usual anxiety that accompanies such requests. The lanyard signaled to the world that I *may* need extra support, and in doing so, it freed me from the pressure to pretend that I didn't. It was almost like a small act of self-advocacy, one that allowed me to navigate an overwhelming environment at my own pace, instead of drowning in the sense of shame and self-hate that usually accompanies the sensory overload at airports and pushes me to the brink of a meltdown.

The sunflower lanyard reminds me that asking for help is simply a recognition of our shared humanity, and that it's *okay* to function on crip time.

This is the world I want to live in—one where I don't have to justify ordering ice and tea, or wearing a sunflower lanyard, and where my need for support is met with understanding rather than judgment. It's a world where we all belong, not because we've achieved some arbitrary standard of independence, but because we've recognized the strength that comes from relying on one another.

Devrupa Rakshit is an award-winning independent journalist, social media consultant, new media artist, and disability rights advocate based in India. Her work—which focuses on the intersections of mental health, gender, and social justice, particularly through the lens of disability and neurodivergence—has appeared in several national and international publications. A former lawyer, Devrupa is also a bilingual poet and regularly performs spoken word poetry on anti-establishment themes directed at challenging exclusionary and unsustainable societal norms.

Murugiah is a multidisciplinary British Sri Lankan artist, illustrator, and designer working in London. Using a colorful, surreal visual aesthetic, he playfully explores the macabre, bittersweet, and joyful experience of his daily life and identity. Infused with candy-coated dreams and peppered with South Asian motifs, his work—encompassing film, architecture, art, and design—resonates with those seeking kindness, authenticity, and compassion. See his work at murugiah.com and @_murugiah

Isabella Rossellini Wants You to Wake Up

Tune in to hear the actress and filmmaker host the fourth season of the AWAKEN podcast

by Howard Kaplan

What does it mean to wake up? And what is the path to get there? AWAKEN, the Webby-Honoree podcast from the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art, explores the idea of awakening through Buddhism, art, science, and personal stories of transformation and shifts in perspective.

The series features insights from artists, writers, psychologists, poets, neuroscientists, art historians, Buddhist teachers, and others, with guests including writer, professor, and photographer Ocean Vuong; Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher and author Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche; novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest Ruth Ozeki; comedian Aparna Nancherla; and more.

Season 4, released last year, is hosted by actress and filmmaker Isabella Rossellini and unpacks the Buddhist concept of non-attachment. The episodes travel through understanding both attachment and non-attachment in relation to the ego, freedom, love, and interdependence, as well as looking at the path to non-attachment and what it looks like to realize. As contemplative social scientist Eve Ekman says in episode 1, "There's just such a beauty and eloquence of understanding why we want to have this non-attached or non-clinging state. It's so we can be free."

Featured guests include psychologist Dr. Richie Davidson; author and transformational thought leader Sonya Renee Taylor; chef Reem Assil; poet and essayist Ross Gay; and teacher and meditation master in the Bon Buddhist tradition Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. They reveal how releasing what no longer serves us creates space for new ways of seeing, thinking, and being in the world.

The next season, to be released this summer, will delve into the concept of interdependence, using a painting of the Wheel of Existence from the Rubin's collection as a jumping off point to explore the nature of our interconnected world. As scholar of Tibetan Buddhism Annabella Pitkin says in season 4, "We always are and always have been and always will be completely interconnected and interdependent with everything and everyone else."

RUBIN

Listen to AWAKEN at rubinmuseum.org/awaken

Photo by Liz Ligon

ROOTED IN CONNECTION

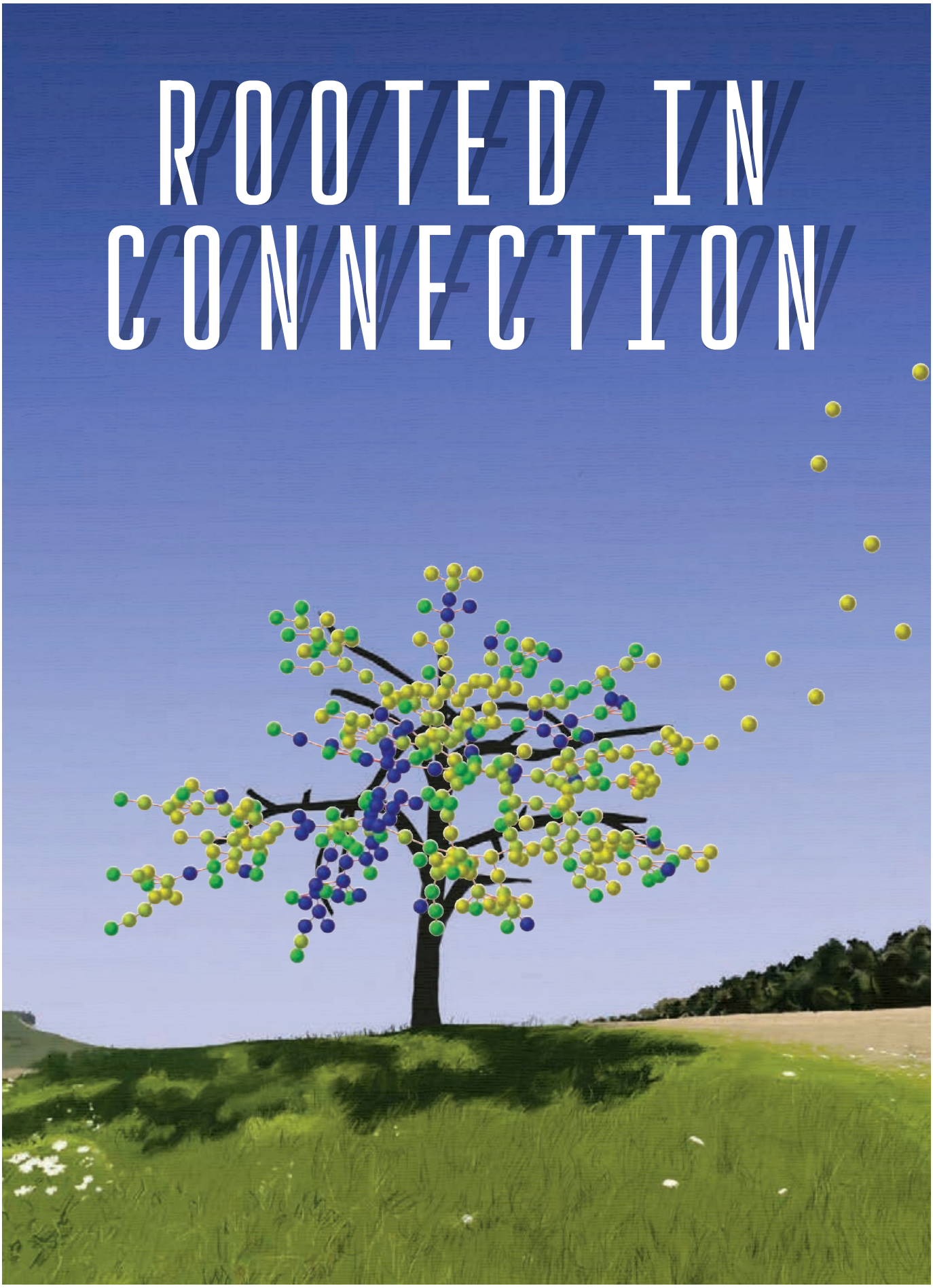


Illustration by Lena Christakis

How social networks make us who we are

Nicholas A. Christakis

interviewed by

Sarah Zabrodski

Sarah Zabrodski: From the perspective of your profession, how would you define interdependence?

Nicholas A. Christakis: I've spent the last twenty-five years studying complex social networks. They are intrinsically an interdependent structure. Each of us inherits our relatives, picks our friends and coworkers, and all of those people in turn are picking or inheriting other people as connections. We therefore proceed to assemble ourselves into this large, interdependent, beautiful, baroque, organic structure known as a social network.

And your fate and life depends, to some material extent, on where you are in such a network. Anyone can understand this, nowadays, because of our recent experience with the pandemic. Whether you get COVID depends, for example, not just on your own actions, but the actions of your friends and the actions of your friends' friends and the actions of your friends' friends' friends.

Our fates are connected to the fates of others, including people we don't even know. And this interdependence can be understood using a variety of scientific tools from biology, psychology, sociology, physics, and mathematics, because our social networks obey very particular (and scientifically intelligible) rules.

Could you speak about the scientific principle of emergence and how it is related?

Emergence is the idea that collections of things can have properties that are not intrinsic to the thing itself. The simplest example is carbon. You can take carbon atoms and combine them one way, and you get graphite, which is soft and dark. Or you can take the same carbon atoms and combine them another way, and you get diamond, which is hard and clear. There are two key ideas here. First, these properties of softness and darkness and hardness and clearness are not properties of the carbon atoms. They are properties of the *collection* of carbon atoms. And second, which properties you get depends on how you connect the carbon atoms to each other.

That's emergence—that these new properties arise because of complexity, because of interdependence, because of interconnection. It's a magnificent phenomenon in nature, not just restricted to chemistry or biology, but also relevant to our social lives.

I think most people are familiar with how strangers can impact us when it comes to contracting a virus. How do people we don't even know influence us in ways that we might not realize?

Over the last twenty years in my lab, we've done a lot of studies of this, including large-scale experiments in online settings, as well as in public health settings around the world. Initially, we did observational research. We studied, using mathematical and statistical tools, naturally occurring systems. We found, for example, that your body size depends, to some extent, not only on your own choices and actions, but also the choices and actions and the body size of your friends, and your friends' friends, and your friends' friends' friends. Also, we found that how happy you are can depend on where you are in the network and the state of happiness of other people, including not only the people you are directly connected to, but even people you don't know and are only indirectly connected to.

Those are examples of things that can spread by a process of social contagion within social networks. But it's very difficult to know for sure that that is what's happening when you use observational data. To really be certain, you have to do experiments.

What kinds of experiments can be done?

Beginning in 2010, we started doing experiments with tens of thousands of people online and in settings around the world, from Honduras to India to Uganda. For example, you can bring people into a laboratory setting, randomly assign them to groups of four strangers, and have them play something known as a public goods game. In such a game, each person has some money. If I

Network Tree by Lena Christakis

Growing up, I saw many of my dad's intricate diagrams of human networks depicting various forms of social connection and interdependence. For this illustration, I used a network from his 2008 research on the social contagion of happiness to depict a budding tree. I wanted each node—which represents an individual—to also represent pollen, connoting the spread of happiness and the formation of the network itself. Little yellow nodes float off the branch, literally spreading happiness.

give one dollar to the group of four, that one dollar is doubled and then it's divided among the four people. The group as a whole has gained two dollars from my one dollar contribution, but then that two dollars is divided four ways and comes back to each person, so I only get back fifty cents. The group benefits, but I pay a price.

Most people might expect that nobody will contribute. From an individual, selfish point of view, the smartest thing to do is give nothing and hope that everyone else contributes. Of course, if nobody contributes, the group collapses. But the best outcome is if everyone contributes maximally.

How you act, what you know, and how you feel depends on your embeddedness in the vast fabric of humanity.

And, indeed, most people are kind and do contribute, and they have some realistic expectation that others will reciprocate.

In that first experiment, people played this public goods game across multiple rounds. A bell would ring and they would play with new strangers, and then ring again and they would play with new strangers. We were able to show that if Tom was kind to Dick in round one, Dick would be kind to Harry in round two, Harry would be kind to Betty in round three, and Betty would be kind to Susie in round four. So how Betty treated Susie depended on how Tom treated Dick, even though neither Betty nor Susie ever saw or interacted with Tom or Dick. We were able to experimentally demonstrate the social contagion of goodness, spreading through a network.

Are there experiments that show how this can play out in the real world?

In other experiments, we mapped the social networks of 24,000 people living in 176 isolated villages in Honduras, who we followed for eight years. We randomly chose certain people in the network, according to certain mathematical algorithms, and we taught them things relevant to maternal and child health, like breastfeeding, vaccination, and so on. We were able to artificially create cascades of the contagion of this desirable knowledge in these isolated villages, improving the health of everyone in the village, not just the subset of people selected to get the knowledge directly. We have also done similar work in India.

In short, both observationally and experimentally, over the last twenty years, we have been able to show that social contagion is an important factor in our lives. How you act, what you know, and how you feel depends on your embeddedness in the vast fabric of humanity.

How do our genes influence our social network?

In my laboratory, we've been able to show that genes don't just affect the structure and function of our bodies and minds, but also the structure and function of our societies. In other words, our genes play a role in how we interconnect with each other. For example, it's obvious that some people are born shy, and some people are born gregarious. People vary in their taste for friendship. But we have also shown that whether your friends are friends with each other depends not just on their genes but on *your* genes.

If Tom, Dick, and Harry are in a room, whether Dick is friends with Harry, depends not just on Dick's genes or on Harry's genes, but on Tom's genes. That's really weird. And the reason is that people vary in their tendency to introduce their friends to each other. Natural selection has shaped our propensity to interconnect the world around us.

Our genes oblige us to create these social worlds. We make social networks very deliberately and following very particular mathematical and biological rules.

We have not only shown this using molecular biology but also anthropology. For example, the Hadza hunter-gatherers of Tanzania live like all humans did at the end of the Pleistocene. We found that their networks mathematically and structurally look just like ours. Despite the fact that in the intervening ten thousand years, humans have developed agriculture, cities, and telephones, the structure of social networks of people who live in the modernized world is indistinguishable from the structure the Hadza make.

What's amazing is that other scientists have also mapped the social networks of elephants and dolphins and other large social mammals. And the networks that elephants make are mathematically very similar to ours. Our last common ancestor with elephants is ninety million years ago. So elephants evolved the same structure of social networks independently of us.

Do we have more or less control than we think?

Many people have said about our work that it delivers a whack to free will, which is kind of true in a way. We have free will, in my view, but we may have less than we realize, once you take network effects seriously.

First of all, the play of chance in our lives is huge. You have no control over your birth order or your parents' educational status or where you were born. All of these things have huge impacts on what happens to you in your life and the choices you are free to make.

Yet returning to network effects, on the one hand, our work adds to the list of things that constrain the range

of opportunity for free will, because I'm suggesting, in an empirically documented way, that things like your happiness and your altruism and your childcare practices depend on people around you, even people you don't even know.

However, at the same time that our embeddedness in networks compromises your ability to act freely, it also ironically *increases* the importance of your acting freely. Because every time you make a positive change in your life—when you're nicer to other people or when you quit smoking—you create these ripple effects around you that don't just affect your friends, but also your friends' friends and your friends' friends' friends. You could affect hundreds of other people when you choose to make a change.

Knowing all this, does interdependence make you feel pessimistic or optimistic?

One of the first principles of social networks is that they magnify whatever they are seeded with. But networks are agnostic. They will magnify fascism and violence and hatred and misinformation. But also, equally, they will magnify love and kindness and happiness and ideas. Networks don't on their own give rise to these phenomena. Some external force has to get the contagion going.

I argue in my book *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* that the benefits of a connected life outweigh the costs. But it's important not to assume that there aren't any costs, because mob action (such as lynchings and witch burnings) arises because of interconnection. Or market bubbles, which can arise because of interconnection and misinformation.

I would say that social connection overall is good and is a net benefit, but it's not an unmitigated good. There are costs that come with social connection as well.

Is there a benefit to bringing awareness to how our beliefs or actions are influenced by others? And what would be a strategy for doing so?

I think it's important to be reflective and to think about how one is behaving and how one has come to believe certain things. Why do I actually hold this opinion? How can I be certain that this is true? Why am I doing what I am doing? One of the easiest things you can do, in this regard, is to seek out people you disagree with and talk to them without judgment. A good way to test your beliefs is to talk to someone who has the opposite belief.

What lessons have you gleaned from your research that could help in terms of affecting positive change on a large scale?

We've done a lot of experiments in my lab showing that our scientific ideas regarding social contagion can be deliberately exploited to enhance awareness of beneficial public health practices; facilitate the flow of accurate information online; decrease misinformation, prejudice, and bigotry in social communications; and facilitate creativity in groups. There are ways pragmatically to exploit this knowledge to make the world better.

Nicholas A. Christakis, MD, PhD, MPH, is the Sterling Professor of Social and Natural Science at Yale University. His work is in the fields of network science and biosocial science. He directs the Human Nature Lab and is the co-director of the Yale Institute for Network Science. He was elected to the National Academy of Medicine in 2006; the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2010; the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2017; and the National Academy of Sciences in 2024.

Sarah Zabrodski is the senior editor and publications manager at the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art.

Lena Christakis is a New England–raised and New York City–based painter who graduated from Yale University in 2020 with a BA in art. Staging various tableaus using a collage-like compositional strategy, Christakis tries to portray a sense of humor about the world and a deep appreciation for the strange earth magic it produces. She has exhibited her work across the United States and abroad, and her first New York City solo show opens winter 2025. See her work @lenachristakis

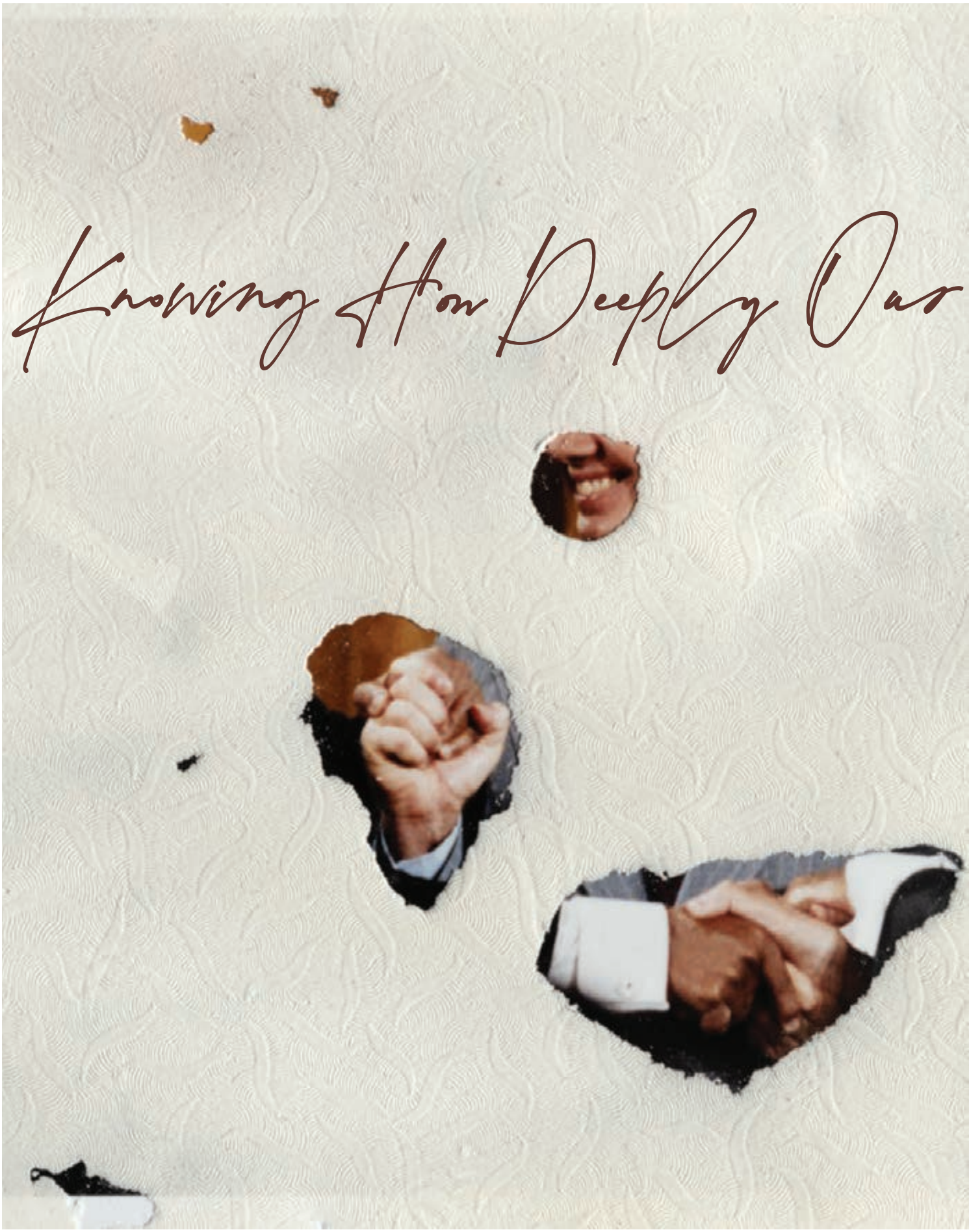
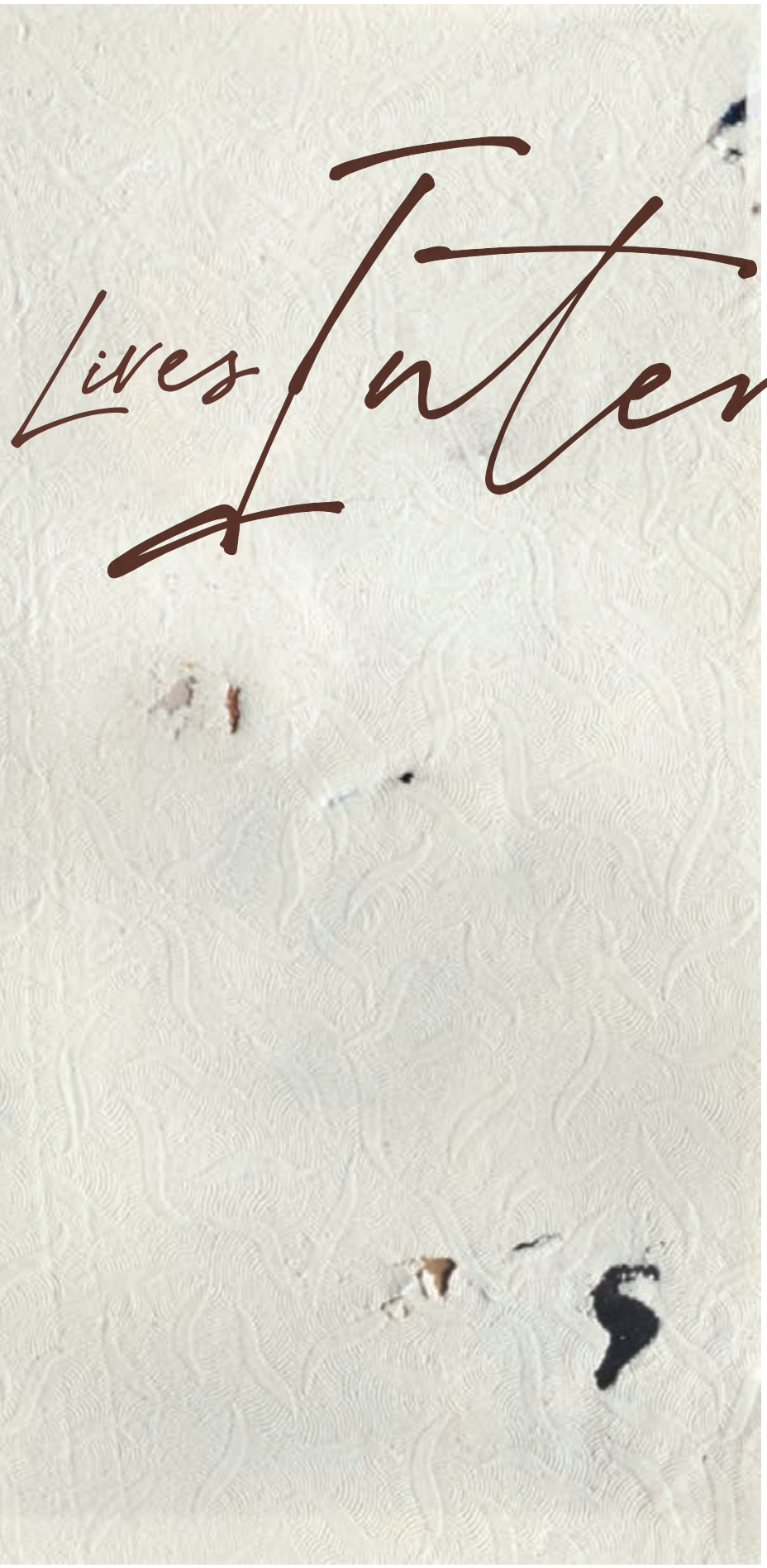


Illustration by Priya Suresh Kambli



Lives Intertwine

Activism based on the wisdom of interdependence is the only way to create real change

by **Kaira Jewel Lingo**

Social and racial justice activism must be based on an understanding of our fundamental interconnectedness in order to bring about real and lasting transformation. The teachings on interdependence are some of the deepest teachings in Buddhism. They support us in breaking free of the illusion of separation—which lies at the heart of our suffering, individually and collectively.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized turning enemies into friends. During the war in Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh similarly insisted that "man is not our enemy." The real enemy is ignorance, hatred, and greed in our hearts—that is what we must transform. This kind of

activism—the kind that strives not to polarize or to "other" those we are in conflict with—takes time, patience, and great spiritual strength and discipline. It is not quick nor surface level. It holds as fundamental the possibility of belonging for *all* of us.

One way interdependence is expressed as interwoven with social and racial justice is in various formulations of the Buddha's Five Precepts for lay practitioners to live an ethically grounded life and avoid causing unnecessary suffering to self and others. In the version of these precepts offered by Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village Community, each one begins with, "Aware of the suffering caused by . . . (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, etc.), I am committed to . . . (protecting life, practicing generosity, respecting my commitments and the commitments of others, etc.)."

An even clearer orientation toward interbeing is present in the phrasing of the Five Trainings offered by Inward Bound Mindfulness to teens and young adults on secular mindfulness retreats: "Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine, I undertake the commitment to . . . (protect life, take only what is offered to me, etc.)."

Activism that is based on interdependence sees the power of forgiveness and is concerned with how to "heal the land," as Senator Raphael Warnock has said. What can we do now to heal division and polarization so that at least our children or their children may reap the fruits of peace? We must acknowledge the ways we have been conditioned to see ourselves as separate and cut off. john a. powell of the Othering & Belonging Institute has said:

> We're dealing with three strong separations, and these separations are, in some ways, of the same cloth, but it's also useful to talk about them separately. One is the separation from ourselves. Another is the separation from the other, or the person we call the other. And the third is separation from the earth. These separations go back to the Enlightenment. This is actually what Western society has been about. It's been about building and celebrating separations.

This mistaken view of separation can and must be challenged and healed. As W. H. Auden wrote in his poem "September 1, 1939" on the eve of the Second World War, "We must love one another or die."

United States President Jimmy Carter knew this when he was working to establish a peace accord between Israel and Egypt in 1978. The meetings between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin at the Camp David Accords kept breaking down, and each side threatened to leave the talks, literally packing their bags several times. Each time President Carter convinced them to stay, bicycling back and forth between their residences when they would no longer meet in person. When it seemed they could not move past the impasse and all was lost, President Carter went to them individually with pictures of his grandchildren, and they shared pictures of their grandchildren. He told them, "We must come to a peace agreement for their sakes." He took the pictures of Begin's grandchildren to Sadat, and then showed Sadat's grandchildren to Begin. They signed the peace agreement.

My dad, a white Texan, joined the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s. Part of his awakening happened while he was studying theology in Germany in 1959 when his parents sent him a local newspaper from Houston. There was an article about a white mob that hung a local Black man by his heels from a tree on the street where my dad grew up. This article ripped away my father's ignorance about what was happening in his hometown. He began to see his interdependence with both those who perpetrated the assault and the Black man, and it motivated him to reflect on his obligation to be part of the decades-long movement to end racial discrimination. In 1964 he joined the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and he participated in nonviolent demonstrations in St. Augustine, Florida, and Selma, Alabama. He was beaten up by racist police and mobs, arrested, and jailed.

My parents later met while working in the ghetto on the West Side of Chicago, where my mom had grown up in a Black working-class family. Their work together was just beginning when Dr. King was assassinated. They were determined to get married and build a life that rejected racism and anti-Blackness. My dad says that working with Dr. King in the Civil Rights Movement helped him to become more fully human.

I am deeply inspired by the wisdom of the modern-day abolition movement, which envisions ways to stop systemic harm and uproot the dangerous beliefs at the root of hatred while at the same time encouraging everyone's flourishing through restoration, healing, and transformation rather than punishment and retaliation. As Mariame Kaba writes in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, "Abolition is a vision of a restructured society where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things that are foundational to our personal and community safety."

Such a vision is possible and social and racial justice activism based on the wisdom of interdependence can help us get there.

Kaira Jewel Lingo is a Dharma teacher with a lifelong interest in spirituality and social justice. After living as an ordained nun for fifteen years in Thich Nhat Hanh's monastic community, she now teaches internationally in the Zen lineage and the Vipassana tradition. She is author of *We Were Made for These Times: Ten Lessons in Moving through Change, Loss and Disruption* and co-author of *Healing Our Way Home: Black Buddhist Teachings on Ancestors, Joy and Liberation*. Her teachings and writings can be found at kairajewel.com

Priya Suresh Kambli is a professor of art at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. Kambli's artistic approach is grounded in interventions with her family's inheritance—a personal archive of photographs and heirlooms. This archive, which she brought with her to the United States at age eighteen, a few years after her parent's death, places her work in the context of migrant narratives and feminist practice. See Kambli's work at priyakambli.com and @kambli.priya

Access in a Different Way

Bringing Himalayan art to university and college museums across the country

by **Howard Kaplan**

Although the Rubin Museum closed the doors of its physical space in New York City last October, multiple new doors have opened in cities across America, in places as varied as St. Olaf, Minnesota; Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; and Salt Lake City, Utah. The traveling exhibition *Gateway to Himalayan Art* is part of the Rubin's transformative three-part educational initiative Project Himalayan Art, which also encompasses a publication and digital platform. "Our hope is that this project and its resources not only inspire a next generation of scholars that can expand the field of Himalayan art, but that Tibetan, Himalayan, and Inner Asian arts and cultures become incorporated in presentations of broader Asia," say Rubin curators Elena Pakhoutova and Karl Debreczeny.

Gateway is modeled after the long popular introductory exhibition that ran for fourteen years at the Rubin Museum. It features forty to eighty objects from the Museum's collection, depending on the venue size. The exhibition acquaints visitors with the fundamental visual language and meanings of Himalayan art and offers exceptional tools to understand Buddhist concepts and artistic techniques. The lost-wax casting installation, for instance, gives students "a way to enter into the material because it is so visual and anybody can appreciate the process," says Janice Glowski, Asian art historian and director of the Frank Museum of Art at Otterbein University, in Westerville, Ohio.

The exhibition has offered opportunities for students from all kinds of disciplines to learn. According to Rachel Chamberlain, manager of education outreach and digital resources at the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College, "It connected different departments at schools at the university, including art history, Asian studies, and theology, as well as literature, nursing, and creative writing." *Gateway* was also an opportunity to engage with the Tibetan and East Asian communities in the Boston area, who participated in docent tours, meditation sessions in the shrine room installation, and an international open mic night where people read poetry, told jokes, and shared creative nonfiction.

"The exhibition has been valuable to many different people," says Glowski. "Online resources are fantastic, but through the traveling show, people in the Midwest had access in a different way. They spent time with the art, often through multiple visits. They could really be with the show in an intimate space. It hit people in the heart to be so close to the materials. While looking at a Buddha image, one student said, 'I understand differently now that I'm standing in front of him.' He had never been in a museum and having the *Gateway* exhibition around the corner was transformative."

Find out if *Gateway* is traveling to a city near you at rubinmuseum.org/gateway-traveling

Photo by Filip Wolak

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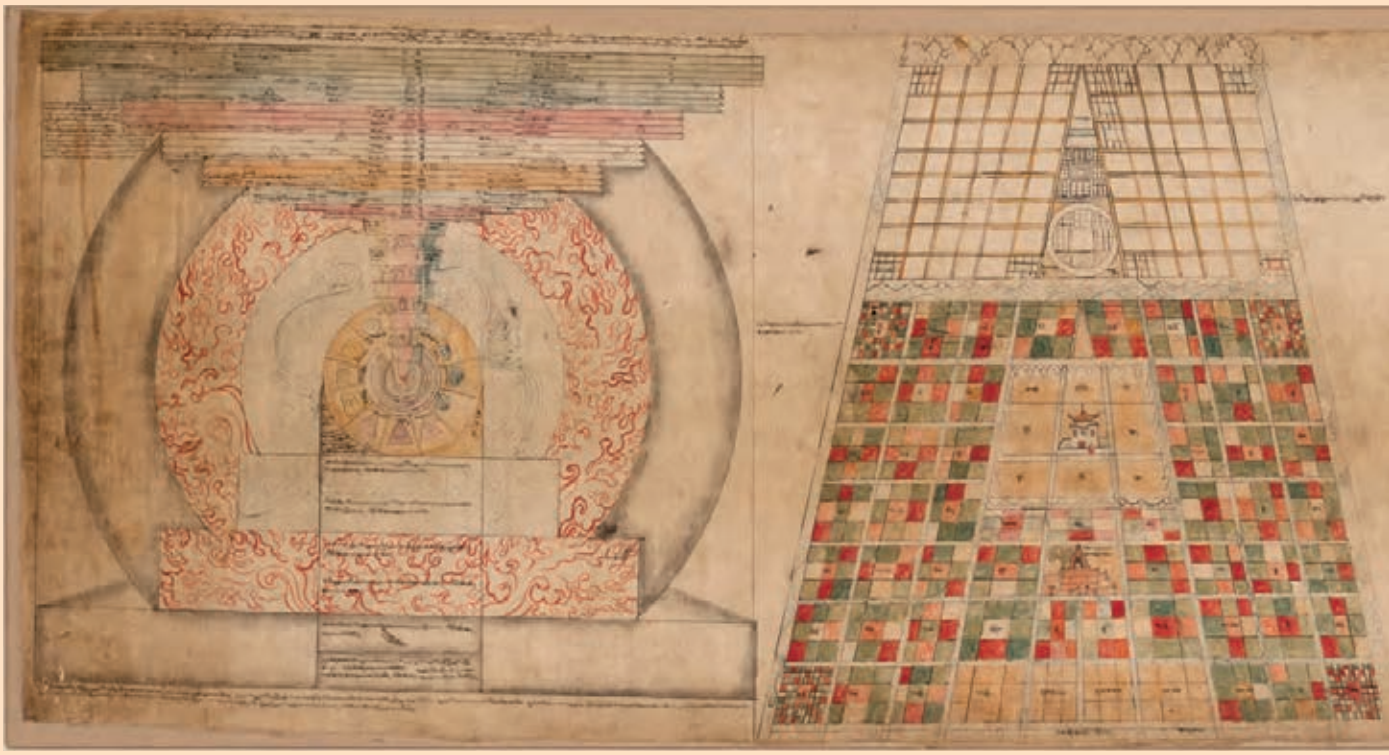

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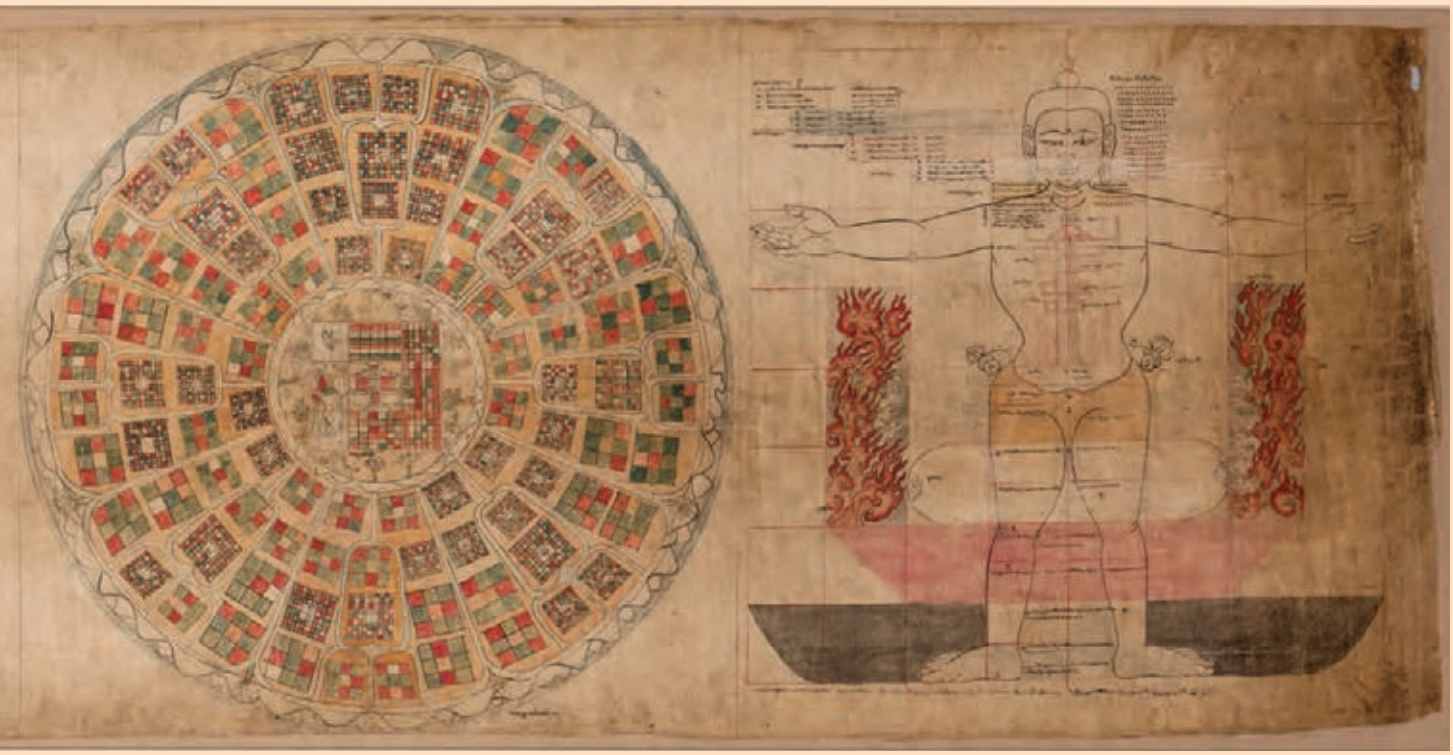
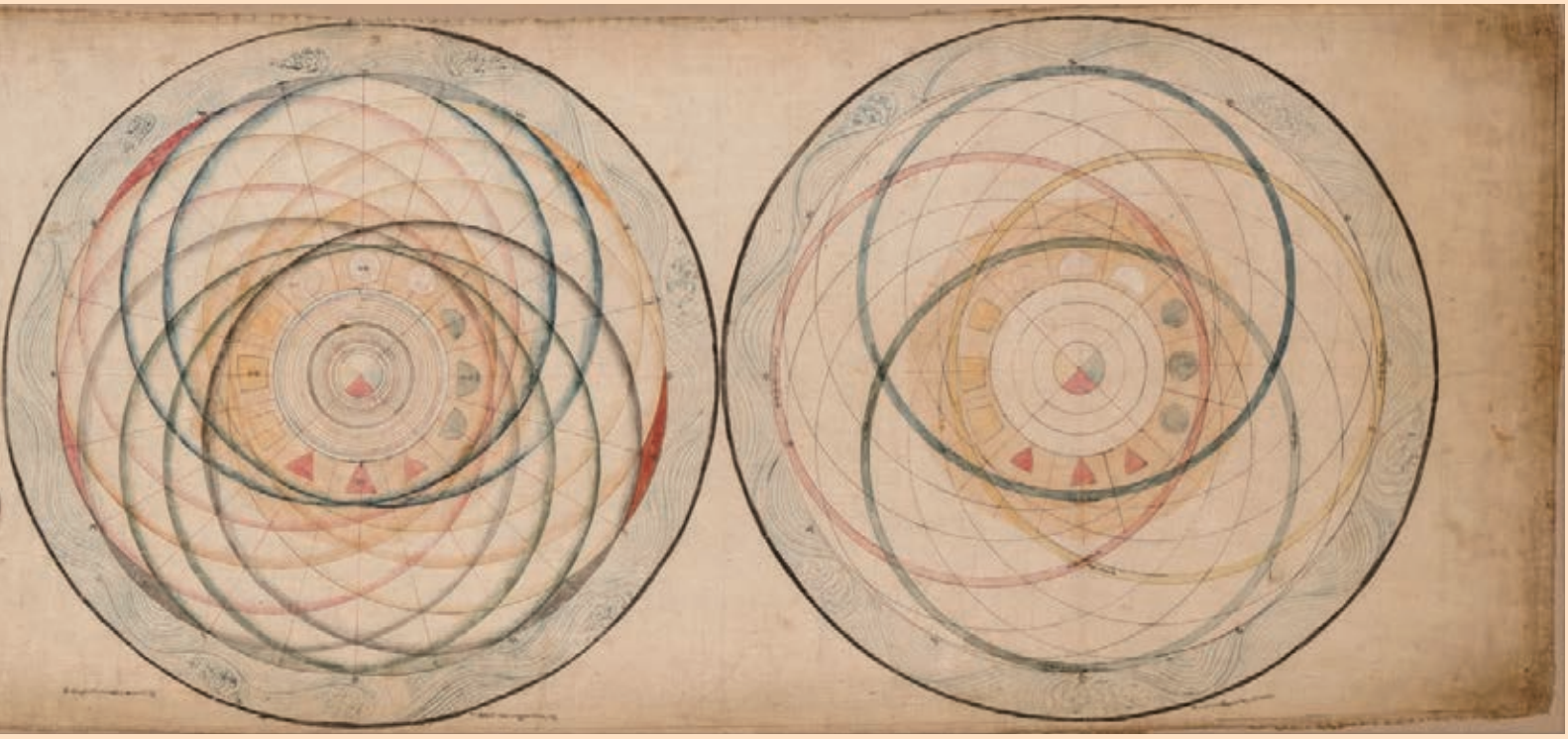




Astrology, medicine, and human potential in the *Kalachakra Tantra*

by **Elena Pakhoutova**

The Buddhist cosmological view expressed in the texts and practices of the *Kalachakra Tantra*, known as the Wheel of Time, explains and integrates observed relationships between the human body and mind with the external universe while foregrounding human experience. It combines a fundamental Buddhist concept—that all of

1. The Outer Universe

This combined view from above and the side shows enormous outer disks/spheres or mandalas of:

- Wind (black, largest)
- Fire (red flames)
- Water (faint blue waves)
- Earth (yellow)
- Six continents around the central axis of Mount Mehru, which widens upward

Humans and other beings live on the six continents. The Gods of the Desire Realm and sensory planes live on the top and the rim of Mount Mehru. Ethereal and formless divine beings are at the very top ("head's crown") of Mount Mehru.

2. The Continent of Jambudvipa

This is the world of humans and animals, featuring:

- Symbolic representation of Tibetan regions as squares around the central temple
- River Shita dividing the continent (blue wavy area)
- Mythical land of Shambhala north of the river (circular, mandala-like detail)
- Mountains north of Kailash, the sacred mountain, at the top

3. Shambhala

Kalachakra Tantra was first propagated and practiced in this hidden land ruled by enlightened kings. Here it is shaped like an eight-petal lotus mandala surrounded by mountains with:

- Each "petal" containing twelve regions with rulers and millions of villages
- Capital city with the *Kalachakra* mandala palace in the center

This land is accessible only to those who have purified their inner "universe" through the *Kalachakra* practice and are truly virtuous.

4. The Human Body as the Universe

The lower body corresponds to the outer rings of:

- Wind
- Fire
- Water
- Earth

From the navel up, the spine correlates with Mount Mehru. The neck, head, and top of the head correspond to the various heavens and the formless planes.

existence is impermanent and has the nature of time—with another essential notion: that the same particles comprising the elements of earth, fire, water, air, space, and awareness make up both the human body and mind and the cosmos. Developed in the eleventh century as the latest comprehensive system of tantric theory and practice, *Kalachakra* describes the association between the internal and external *Kalachakra* as cycles of time. As presented in Tibetan *Kalachakra* traditions, the astrological and medical knowledge of how celestial bodies correlate with the body and mind may help facilitate the advancement of human potential and well-being.

5. Inner Universe

Kalachakra tantric practices contain instructions on the subtle body and the inner channels that carry energy through the body and form a complex network and energy centers (chakras) with astrological correlations. The three main channels are:

- Green and blue (central channel)
- Red
- White

The month when the Sun leaves the sign of Capricorn is associated with channels at the right shoulder. The month when the Sun leaves Pisces is associated with the elbow, and so on.

6. Inner Cosmology

The six chakras correlate with the six elements:

- Space (crown)
- Water (forehead)
- Fire (throat)
- Wind (heart)
- Earth (navel)
- Awareness (sex organ)

The twelve chakras at the main joints (shoulders, elbows, wrists, hips, knees, and ankles) are associated with the twelve zodiac signs. The fingers also correlate with the elements: thumb (earth), second finger (water), third finger (fire), fourth finger (wind), and the fifth finger (space).

7. Celestial Wind Tracks

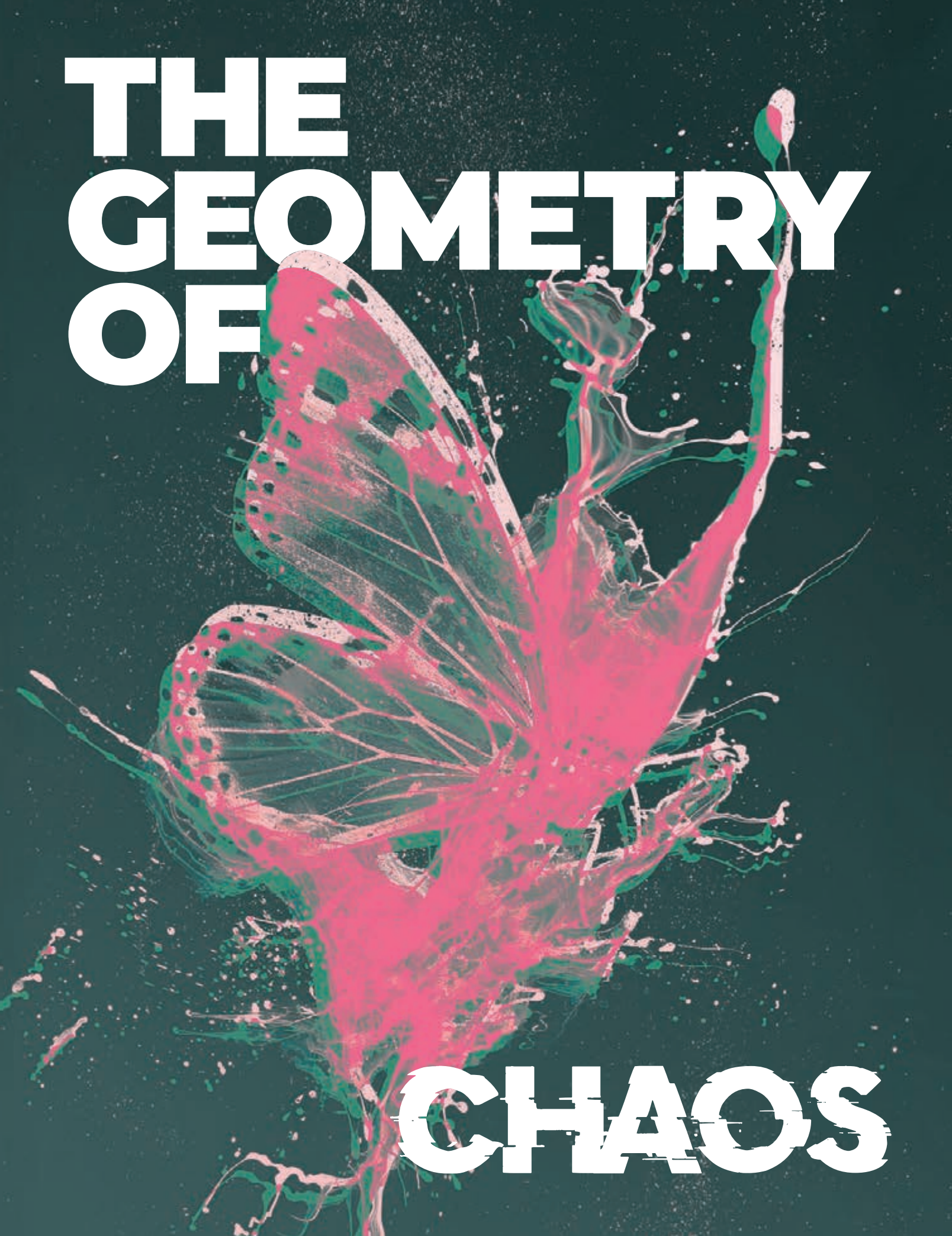
These two spherical images show the view of the universe from above, with Mount Mehru at the center and the continents surrounding it, including Jambudvipa (center red triangle). They show the movement of the Sun over the course of a year:

- "Wind," or energetic tracks, around Mount Mehru in alternating patterns over time, when the Sun travels closer or farther from it in different directions through the twelve sections of the zodiac (left diagram)
- Seasonal points based on the Sun's movement around Mount Mehru (right diagram)
- Grey-green orbit marks the winter solstice, when the Sun enters Capricorn
- Yellow orbit marks the spring equinox, when the Sun enters Aries
- Blue orbit marks the summer solstice, when the Sun enters Cancer
- Red orbit marks the autumnal equinox, when the Sun enters Libra

Kalachakra Cosmology Illustration; Tibet; 16th century; pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art; C2009.9

Elena Pakhoutova is senior curator, Himalayan art, at the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art and holds a PhD in Asian art history from the University of Virginia. She has curated several exhibitions at the Rubin, including *Death Is Not the End* (2023), *The Power of Intention: Reinventing the (Prayer) Wheel* (2019), and *The Second Buddha: Master of Time* (2018).

THE GEOMETRY OF CHAOS



To understand the universe, we have to look at the interconnectedness of every part within this vast system

by **Tim Palmer**

The notion of interdependence is universal in the arts. We do not try to understand a Beethoven symphony or a Shakespeare play simply by analyzing a tiny fragment of the symphony or play. Yet this is how scientists try to understand the world. We take a small sample of the world and show it is made of atoms. We show these atoms, in turn, are made of nuclei and electrons, and the nuclei are made of protons and neurons, which are made from quarks. We think this reductionist process stops there—but we can't be sure.

We can get some sense of what matter is made of, but we have no idea why matter exists in the first place. Indeed, why the universe exists.

It is this seeming division between the holistic and the reductionist that characterizes for many the demarcation between arts and the sciences and is perhaps the reason why many people are deterred from a career in the latter. A molecular biologist can now probe down and study individual genes in a piece of DNA. This may help us find cures for certain illnesses. But it doesn't seem to help in understanding what life actually is and why life exists.

However, this characterization in terms of holism and reductionism is a false one. Ideas from what is known as chaos theory are helping to break down the demarcation lines. Chaos theory reveals how one cannot always break a system into isolated parts and illustrates how understanding the interdependence between different parts is crucial.

Chaotic systems are often characterized by what is called the Butterfly Effect: the idea that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil could catalyze a tornado forming in Texas a week later—or not.

The Butterfly Effect can also be used to describe historical events. My favorite example is that if the doctors presiding over the birth of Princess Vicky's baby boy had taken a little more care, neither World War I nor World War II would have happened. Vicky was Queen Victoria's first child, and she married a German prince, Fritz. The baby was born in breech position, and during the delivery his left brachia plexus was torn, leading to a permanently paralyzed and disfigured arm. The anesthetic given to Vicky, who was in great pain, led to oxygen starvation in the baby's brain, likely causing emotional and learning difficulties later in his life. The royal family kept the child out of public view, especially when his family came to England for the summer social season. As a result, the child grew into a young man with a visceral hatred of all things British. In time, Fritz became Kaiser of Germany, only to die shortly from cancer. The young man with the paralyzed arm and hatred of all things British became Kaiser Wilhelm II, who significantly contributed to the outbreak of World War I. The rest, as they say, is history.

And yet the grip of the Butterfly Effect extends further still. Imagine a game of billiards, with one ball colliding with a second ball, and then a third and so on. How many collisions would have to occur before the direction of travel of a billiard ball was completely changed by the gravitational effect of someone waving their arms a mile from the billiard table? Gravity is a very weak force, so you might expect it to be an astronomical number of collisions. But it's not. It's an extraordinarily small number—about fifteen collisions.

Let's consider something where the answer is surely astronomical. How many collisions would have to occur before the motion of the billiard ball is affected by the gravitational influence of a single electron at the edge of the observable universe? The answer, as estimated by theoretical physicist Michael Berry, is a little more than fifty collisions.

And it's not just billiard balls—it's also collisions between atoms and molecules. Take the brain, for example. When we

make a seemingly whimsical, on-the-spot decision, perhaps it's because of the behavior of a single electron in a distant galaxy many years ago.

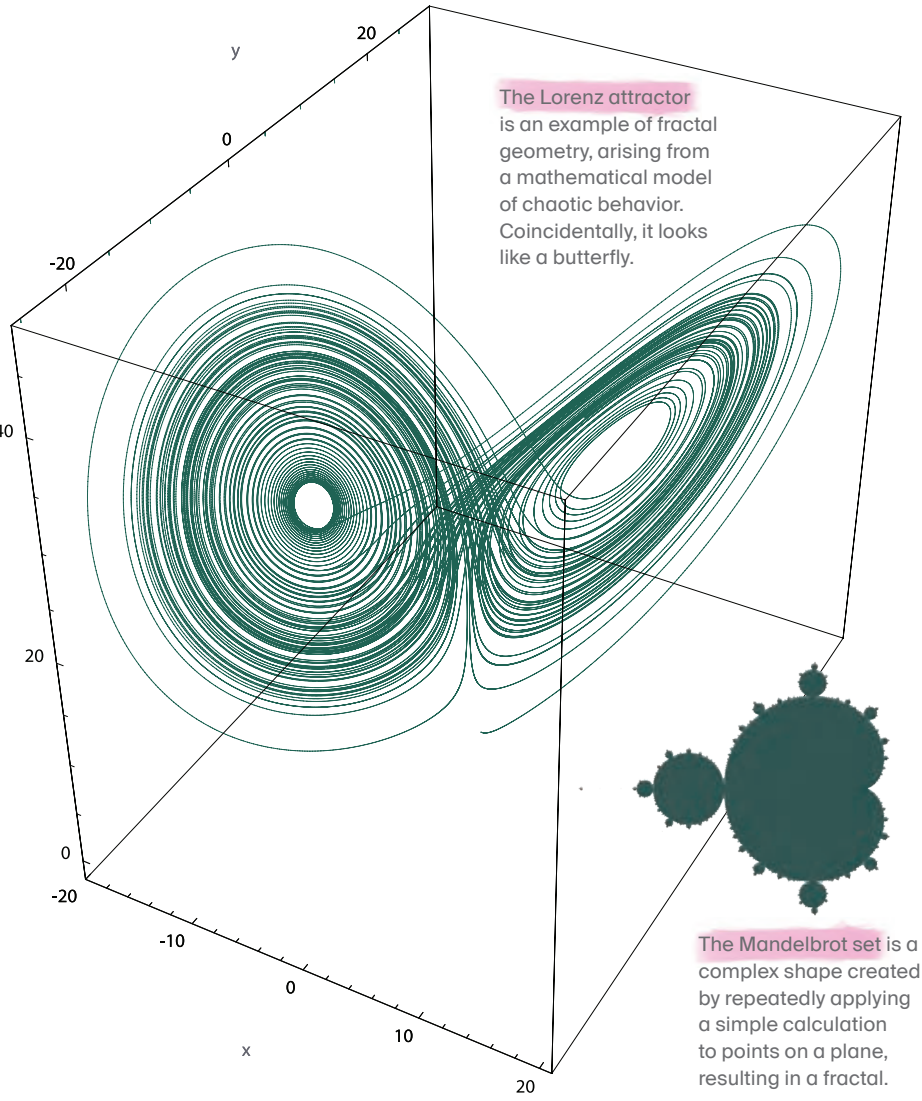
Through the Butterfly Effect we see the profound interconnectedness between all parts of the universe.

Chaos theory also describes the phenomenon of exponential growth. Many of us became familiar with this during the COVID pandemic. If a person with COVID infects two people, and each of them infect two more people, and this continues, the number of people infected can grow to very large numbers. Indeed, after fifty doublings the number is a million billion (one followed by fifteen zeros).

The Butterfly Effect is a characteristic of chaos. But there is more to chaos than just the Butterfly Effect. Fractal geometry underpins chaotic systems. One of the most famous of these fractal geometries is called the Lorenz attractor. It is named after the MIT meteorologist Ed Lorenz who discovered this geometry while studying three relatively simple equations that describe a simplified type of weather system. Isaac Newton would have understood Lorenz's equations, but he would have had no conception of the type of geometry that is linked to them.

What does it mean to say that the geometry of chaos is fractal? As a simple illustrative example, imagine a length of rope. If we zoom into the rope, we see it is made of strands, and the strands are made of smaller yarns, and the yarns are made of twisted fibers. In principle, this could continue indefinitely, as it is characteristic of fractal geometry: it repeats as you zoom into smaller and smaller scales. The famous Mandelbrot set is an example of a fractal geometry.

The fractal geometry of chaos is a manifestation of the interdependence of the different parts of a chaotic system. It is a manifestation of the fact that these individual parts are not independent of each other—they act together in concert. In a chaotic system we cannot isolate individual parts. The whole is much more than the sum of the parts.



The Lorenz attractor is an example of fractal geometry, arising from a mathematical model of chaotic behavior. Coincidentally, it looks like a butterfly.

The Mandelbrot set is a complex shape created by repeatedly applying a simple calculation to points on a plane, resulting in a fractal.

The reductionist paradigm has been extraordinarily successful over the last few hundred years. It has given us the industrial revolution, medical advances, the electronics industry, and space travel—to name just a few. Yet for all that, contemporary physics is facing some profound challenges. Despite being one hundred years since Werner Heisenberg and Erwin Schrödinger formulated the quantum theory of atoms and elementary particles, physicists have been unable to describe the phenomenon of gravity in terms of quantum theory. Yet we know that at the time of the Big Bang, the whole universe was, in some sense, squeezed into the size of an atom. Moreover, despite being able to describe ordinary matter in terms of quarks and electrons, we now know that over ninety-five percent of all mass/energy in the universe—the two are equivalent according to Einstein—is of a form about which we have no understanding at all.

My own view is that the reductionist paradigm may have run its course, and we need to encode the interdependence of different parts of the universe, as described by the fractal geometry of chaos, into the primitive laws of physics. Everything is a microcosm of the universe itself, an assemblage of interconnected pieces. If you don't understand interdependence, you will not understand the universe. The worlds of the arts and the sciences may finally be converging.

Tim Palmer is a Royal Society Research Professor in the physics department at the University of Oxford. His interests range from climate modeling to foundations of quantum physics. He is a fellow of the Royal Society and an international member of the US National Academy of Sciences. He is author of the popular science book *The Primacy of Doubt*, about the science of uncertainty.

Opposite page illustration by Sargam Gupta

Andy

by **Mimi Mondal**

Andy overhears his American colleagues at lunchtime discussing some vampire outbreak in Briarwood. He wants to know more, but seeing him shuts them up, so he proffers a weak smile, refills his coffee, and retreats.

His friends don't care much for vampires. They don't care for America either, less so the surroundings of their engineering campus—miles and miles of vast, lonely landscape that reflects back their indifference. Back in Taipei, Andy was a horror-movie-loving goofball, but here, he's an interchangeable worker drone. How'd anyone assign personality, even humanity, to people they can't even tell apart from one another?

He doesn't expect anyone to remember Yu-Chien Tsai, but "Andy" hasn't proven particularly memorable either. English has a relatively small cache of names. All his friends picked theirs—Charles, Emily, Jackson, Nathan—but that doesn't prevent them from receiving mixed-up orders when they go out to eat. Not even at Frankie's Roadhouse, where they dine three days a week.

Nobody in America notices that on Friday nights Andy drives an hour to Briarwood, where the old cinema screens a midnight horror feature. Post movie, like clockwork, he heads to Frankie's for their special pot roast with extra gravy.

"Bit late for dinner, eh?" Frankie brings up his plate. "Say, you a vampire or summin'?"

"Isn't this gravy loaded with garlic?" Andy retorts. "Barely taste of anything else."

That's the deal with vampire stories, though. Some popular trope turns out to be wrong; that's how they get you. What bites Andy harder is that Frankie still has no idea who he is.

The white-mustachioed roadhouse owner laughs. "Used to be vampires loved this place, y'know? Back when only 'em blue-blood boys came to Briarwood College. All'of'em needed a spot outta town to sneak in their girlfriends . . . or boyfriends. Best business we ever done!"

It's the most conversation an American has ever made with Andy.

"But now the vampires aren't coming?"

"Tell ya what, I'm not crazy 'bout all this new vampire talk." Frankie scowls. "When'd all the hobos and junkies and refugees go an' become vampires?"

Andy grins. "You thought I was one."

"You're not a homeless junkie, are ya? Geez," counters Frankie. "My youngest, Manny, married himself this *Filipino* boy. First college graduate in the family, go figure. So why can't you guys be vampires, right?"

"I'm not Filipino. I'm Taiwanese."

He regrets saying that immediately. Frankie's smile disappears. Whatever movie the roadhouse owner was riffing off, this line clearly isn't part of it.

"Alright, young man." He gets up to leave. "Enjoy yer dinner."

How will he befriend Americans if he can't even engage in their banter? To Americans like Frankie, vampire is far more relatable than Taiwanese. Would it really be so different from playing "Andy," invisible in broad daylight? Not like he hasn't devoured a couple hundred vampire movies in his life.

He'll be the best vampire this town's ever seen, Yu-Chien Tsai decides over his half-eaten pot roast. And America will finally love him.

Read more stories in this series over the course of the year at rubinmuseum.org/spiral

DREAMING IN SENDAK

Illustration by Brendan Wenzel

Picture books cultivate connections to the world around us

by **Brendan Wenzel**

As we walk, the Maine forest begins to transform. Gnarled spruces emerge from the background with newfound presence. The chatter of a red squirrel vibrates through the air with surprising resonance, and even the sparkling stones we dodge along the path seem to pulse with a bit of life. This enchantment isn't the result of magic potions or psychedelic substances but the words of the man five steps ahead.

Nick is a storyteller. He removes his orange baseball cap, as if letting a bit more of the world in, and continues his tale—an exploration of this place and our connection to it. As he speaks, his hands trace the air, sculpting invisible clay, shaping the dangling limbs, the billowy mounds of moss, and the spiky fallen cedars into one living entity. Nick knows much about this forest, but his story is more than just a description of the vast organism—it's an invitation to become part of it. With twists, and turns, he conjures an invisible web connecting us to the forest: its chipmunks, its histories, and even the particles of pine-scented air drifting around us.

As I listen, space seems to expand. Everything shimmers. Boundaries soften, and it feels as though we are strolling across the back of some magnificent, verdant creature. I can't help but wonder what my sneakers feel like pressing against its living skin. A faint tickle? An itch? What do we mean to each other? The experience is a gift, this sense of connection a kind of magic—all thanks to Nick's words and the power of a well-told story. How desperately I would like to walk through that interconnected reality all the time, but with a head full of spinning thoughts, it's hard to get there on my own. Is it possible? How *do* stories come to inhabit some deeper part of us?

I still dream in Maurice Sendak. Not always—certainly not as often as I'd like—but occasionally the space I slip into when I sleep feels strikingly like the strange and beautiful images of *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen*—my favorite of his books since age three. It's not that I stroll right into a Maurice Sendak painting, but rather my dreams—their forests, their crashing waves, the unusual creatures I sometimes meet—have an undeniably Sendak-like quality to them. As a kid, I spent hours staring at those books, captivated by images of palm-peppered dreamscapes and airplanes sculpted from dough. Why have Sendak's masterpieces, and so many books from childhood, had such a profound effect?

I think about this question often because I write and illustrate picture books. One of the greatest challenges and assets for picture bookmakers is how to work with space. With usually around thirty-two pages, plus a book cover, case, and endpaper, space is a precious resource. Many mornings are spent banging one's head against the nearest wall, trying to edit stories down to something that will not only fit in this limited real estate but hopefully make the reader feel a little something as well.

Space is also one of the most interesting tools we picture bookmakers have to bring stories to life. It waits in the hidden corners of images. It hangs in the anticipatory breaths between page turns. It expands in the triangulated frontier between words, pictures, and most importantly, the reader. It is in these spaces that children can form their own experiences with a book. It is in these spaces that a story begins to belong to a reader, and where it feels like deep connections can be cultivated. It is why I believe my childhood books came to inhabit that deeper part of me. Sitting silently with a book in hand was an opportunity to step outside myself, to open up to other beings, other perspectives, and other ways of existing in the world. It allowed those stories to become part of me, and I suspect is the reason that decades later, I still dream in Sendak.

It is a privilege and responsibility to make books for children. The little universes we invite into being may become a few bricks of the foundation on which a young mind will begin to build their reality. What do we hope their relationship with the interconnected world will be? How do we create spaces for children to form a deeper connection to the living planet on whose back our stories unfold?

As I walk with Nick, I wonder how I might experience space differently if my friend's story of the world had reached me when I was a kid. How might my connection to not just this place, but all places and their inhabitants be different? It makes me hopeful. My shelves are overflowing with cherished picture books, yet somehow I am more excited to see what coming generations create with this remarkable form of storytelling. How will our stories and experiences grow? What hidden spaces might be waiting to be welcomed into the foreground of our lives?

Brendan Wenzel is a *New York Times* bestselling author and illustrator, with great affection for all things furred, feathered, and scaly. When not creating books for children, he is a proud collaborator with many groups working to protect and conserve wild places and creatures. Brendan's book *They All Saw a Cat* received a 2017 Caldecott honor.

Homage to *Yum Chenmo*, the Great Mother

by **Dekila Chungyalpa**

In 2009, I lost my faith in politicians, governments, and the private sector to ever "fix" the environmental and climate crisis. I watched a "yes we can" president distance himself from progressives, witnessed the death of the American Clean Energy and Security Act on the Senate floor (it would take fourteen years for another US bill on climate change to be introduced), and lived through the ignominious collapse of the Fifteenth Convention of Parties led by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in Copenhagen, largely engineered by the United States, China, and other industrialized countries.

Before then, it was obvious to me that neoliberalism (extreme capitalism with no checks or balances) and its growth-at-all-costs agenda was fueling the environmental and climate crises. By the end of 2009, I came to accept that this global economic system allowed politicians, governments, and the private sector to profit so greatly from environmental and climate devastation that they were, in fact, disincentivized to stop it.

I was devastated. It is hard to explain how traumatic a crisis of faith is to people who may not share that experience

Illustration by Gonkar Gyatso

with you. I had been an environmentalist since I was fifteen and had worked for mainstream environmental organizations for over a decade at that point. Suddenly, there I was, questioning every decision made by the movement I belonged to. Trying to make sense of it all, I wrapped myself up in my community, spent time with senior Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns, went wandering in wilderness areas, consulted endlessly with friends and mentors, and revisited my favorite thinkers and writers (Walden Bello, Vine Deloria Jr., bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Vandana Shiva, to name a few).

Sometimes a crisis of faith is necessary for us to wake up and choose a new path, even one that is littered with major obstacles, confusing trail signs, or no signs at all. In my case, I chose faith. Not only my own faith but also those representing over eighty percent of the human population. I convinced the World Wildlife Fund to let me work with world religions in priority conservation landscapes. I expanded *Khoryug*, a project I had created in 2008 to help Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries in the Himalayas lead local environmental protection projects under the auspices of His Holiness the Karmapa, and began working with Buddhists in Cambodia and Thailand. I launched a new program called Sacred Earth and built partnerships with the Catholic Church, Indigenous leaders, Muslim clerics, and Evangelical preachers in the Amazon, East Africa, and United States on conservation and climate issues. It was the saving of me and the making of what is now the Loka Initiative, an education and outreach platform at the University of Wisconsin–Madison that supports faith-led environmental and climate efforts locally and around the world.

The simple truth is that economic growth is incompatible with a living planet. Neoliberalism, which has dominated the world for over fifty years, props up a tiny sliver of a fraction of the human population to hoard the vast majority of resources and power. The truth is the gap between the rich and the poor has never been so stark: since 2020, the richest one percent has taken possession of nearly two thirds of all new wealth, worth forty-two trillion USD. The truth is that oligarchs will always tow us toward fascism, including political and social chaos, because it allows them to maintain and consolidate even more power than what they already have. And so here we are.

2024 was the hottest year on record. November 2024 was the sixteenth consecutive month where the global-average surface air temperature exceeded 2.7°F (1.5°C) above preindustrial levels. Keep in mind 1.5°C was supposed to be our maximum threshold for global warming; instead, it has become our new baseline. If there isn't a drastic change now, we are headed toward 2.5°C global warming by the year 2100.

That means we are now living in a time that is unprecedented in human history. This year *and every year ahead* will see a sharp irreversible increase in more frequent and intense climate related *un*natural disasters. We are operating beyond what is safe for seven of the nine planetary boundaries—what are essentially the planet's operating systems. Climate is only one of those operating systems that regulate the Earth. The problem and the miracle of our planet's operating systems is that all of them are interdependent with each other. As one changes or collapses, it triggers a cascade of effects that we cannot entirely predict.

In the last fifty years, we have hemorrhaged seventy percent of vertebrate populations (mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish). We have released 350,000 different types of manufactured chemicals, including pesticides, microplastics, and industrial chemicals, much of which are unregulated, into every corner of the planet and every part of our own bodies. And our construction of largescale dams and other water technologies have so altered rivers, lakes, and streams that they are no longer able to regulate vital ecological and climatic freshwater processes.

The absolute truth is that we are in deep trouble.

How do we hold fast, attempting systems change at all levels, knowing what is barreling down upon us? How do we find the courage to keep striving? Here is the other absolute truth that keeps me going. It turns out that I am capable of losing faith in politicians, institutions, ideologies, and even movements, but never in the sacredness of the Earth herself. What is the Earth after all but the primordial and literal object of refuge for us all?

I come from a land and from a tradition where the people make prostrations as they circumambulate sacred mountains and lakes, taking refuge and purifying ourselves as we do so. And, in the act of taking refuge, we are taught to align our body with our mind and our spirit. Every meditation practice in Tibetan Buddhism shows us how. We begin each practice with the ritual of three prostrations. We prostrate to the outer objects of refuge of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha; to the inner objects of refuge of the *Lama*, the *Yidam*, and the *Khandro*; and sometimes to the secret objects of refuge. We close each practice by dedicating its merit to the benefit of all sentient beings. Both of these acts emphasize an important aspect of meditation practice, maybe even the most important one: our meditation is not meant to be a solely cerebral or even spiritual practice—it has to be embodied to have meaning. Why call it practice other than to remind ourselves that it is a rehearsal for being tangibly in relationship with others?

When I think of the Earth, I am filled with awe. Behold this one tiny life-bearing miracle of a planet in the vastness of the universe, organizing every biological process around the principles of compassion and interdependence, birthing innumerable sanghas of life that collaborate in order to survive and thrive. What is the Earth if not the perfect embodiment of the three jewels: the enlightened one, the manifestation of the ultimate truth, and the body collective that strives toward both?

Through her arises all the conditions for life and through her, we breathe-eat-drink-wear-touch loving kindness and compassion. After all, she is *Yum Chenmo,* the Great Mother. Take a moment to look at the in-betweenness inside of you, the in-between space between you and your loved ones, the spaciousness between us and all living beings, and there she is, entwining us with the water, nitrogen, and carbon cycles, ensuring that our well-being is completely interdependent with everything else that exists upon this planet.

Losing faith is painful, even heartbreaking, but even that has value, because from it can emerge great wisdom. We are now at a point where we must lose our blind faith in capitalism and organize ourselves collectively around de-growth and circular economies. That means we will be up against neoliberal fascists and oligarchs who are even now hoarding power and control. It means we must build the courage to stand together from the Buddha ground up, literally for the sake of all sentient beings. It means we must embody all those principles we so deeply admire and cultivate and act upon them.

Ultimately, there is one lasting truth—we have but one Earth, she is our only refuge in the vast universe, and we are inseparable from her. What happens to her happens to us all. It is time to align our bodies with our minds and spirits and to show up tangibly and in relationship with others. The Great Mother is waiting, waiting for us to awaken.

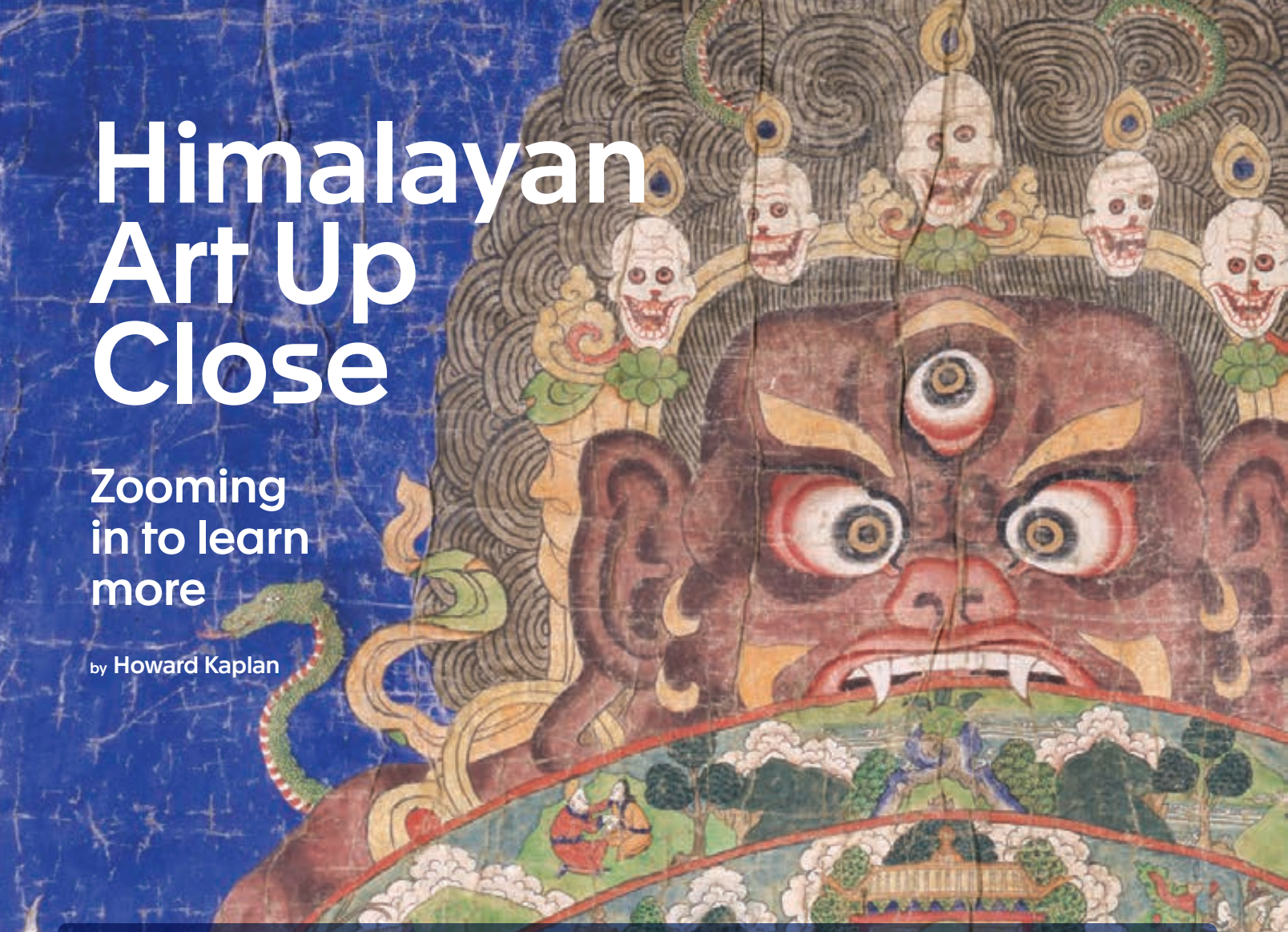
Dekila Chungyalpa is the founding director of the Loka Initiative. She has twenty-five years of experience in global conservation and climate solutions, working on faith-led environmental and climate partnerships, biodiversity landscape and river basin management, community-based conservation and resilience. Dekila is the daughter of the late Tsunma Dechen Zangmo, a Buddhist nun and teacher from Sikkim, and belongs to the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. She occasionally teaches meditation to address eco-anxiety and climate distress.

Gonkar Gyatso is a Tibetan-born British artist. In the 1980s he founded the first contemporary Tibetan art movement and group, the Sweet Tea House Group in Lhasa. In the late 1990s he journeyed to India to immerse himself in the study of Tibetan traditional painting and later secured a scholarship from London's Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. In 2003, he founded the Sweet Tea House Gallery in London. He currently works in Chengdu, China.

Himalayan Art Up Close

Zooming in to learn more

by **Howard Kaplan**



Many objects in the Rubin Museum's collection are intricate and contain multiple layers of history and specialized iconography, calling out for more explanation to understand the ideas embedded within them.

The Rubin's twentieth-century painting of the Wheel of Existence, for instance, encapsulates the Buddhist worldview. But what exactly are we looking at? Apparently, life, death, and everything in between . . . and after. The Lord of Death is depicted with three eyes, a crown with five skulls, and claw-like nails, and for the moment, things are not looking too good for humankind. Yet what is really happening? What if we could take a closer look at the artwork, zoom in for careful looking, and be guided by an expert?

As part of the Rubin's transformation into a global museum with an emphasis on creating engaging digital content, the institution has teamed up with Smarthistory to bring you "up close" looks at select objects from the collection. Smarthistory is an award-winning free online platform dedicated to the study of art history and the most-visited art history resource in the world. The video series features close-looking at art and conversations with Rubin senior curators Elena Pakhoutova and Karl Debreczeny and Smarthistory's Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, offering an introduction to the living traditions and art-making practices of Himalayan regions from the past to today.

"We can't think of a better partner than Smarthistory to create these kinds of videos with," says Rubin Museum Head of Digital Content and Strategy Kimon Keramidas. "Their passion for teaching and learning about art histories from around the world, and commitment to making their materials accessible, match the Rubin's goals."

Many of the highlighted objects are also featured in the Rubin's traveling exhibition *Gateway to Himalayan Art*, offering an integrated way to experience the collection. Among the featured artworks so far are a sculpture of Mahakala, wrathful dharma protector; a painting of Situ Panchen, an esteemed scholar and polymath of the eighteenth century; and of course, the Wheel of Existence. More videos will continue to be released, providing even more pathways to better understand Himalayan art.

RUBIN

Watch the full series at rubinmuseum.org/art-up-close

Wheel of Life; Tibet or Mongolia; 19th century; pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art; gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.131

Illustration by Beto Val

IN AND OF THE WORLD

The critical period of learning to see

by **Leah Kelly**

Where does the world end and I begin? From the moment of conception, our porous membranes allow the flow of information, in all its forms, from outside in and inside out. This reciprocal exchange of information is how energy gives rise to form.

As roots of germinating seeds are beckoned by gravity and sprouts shoot skyward to lean toward the light, such tropisms also exist for us, directing the trajectory of development throughout our lives, fine-tuning and changing our course as circumstances demand. The success of life lies in the tension between plasticity and stability. We must adapt to our environment yet also maintain habits of thinking and behavior. Habits harness the most efficient electrochemical path to achieve our goals. How exhausting would it be to acquire skills and knowledge repeatedly from scratch, learning them over and over, and how limiting for learning not to be lifelong?

Studies observing the amnesiac patient H. M.[1] lead to broad taxonomic distinctions of memory: explicit and implicit. Explicit memory—the stuff you can talk about—was further divided into semantic memory (knowledge about the world) and episodic memory (knowledge about what happened).[2] Semantic and episodic memories form the narrative of self. They tell us who we are. Without them we would be nobody, yet we are forming new ones all the time.

H. M., who had his temporal lobes removed to treat his epilepsy, could not form new explicit memories. He could not tell you what he had had for lunch, but he could form implicit memories. He improved at tasks that require fine motor skills despite not recollecting having done the task before. The conditions of our environment, the smallest tasks of our day, form us over time, without us realizing.

We now know that plasticity and neurogenesis continue throughout life.

Until embarrassingly recently, neurogenesis was thought to occur only during development, but aren't we always developing? We now know that plasticity and neurogenesis continue throughout life. We are not autonomous blueprints dividing immune to input. Our development is, in fact, a continuous feedback loop of constant refinement in response to our internal and external milieux. There are, however, specific developmental windows of intense plasticity, known as critical periods, when interactions between the developing organism and the world it inhabits are particularly crucial. *This particular* brain develops to perceive *this particular* world, with *this particular* body.

A striking example of the biological co-authorship between the internal and external environments is the necessity of visible light for the development of the visual system. David Hubel and Torsten Wiesel received the Nobel Prize in 1981 for experiments performed years earlier to better understand vision, unfortunately using kittens. At birth, kittens possess the necessary neuronal apparatus for sight, but if the eye is deprived of light by being sutured shut, the kittens lose perception of light through the sutured eye permanently, even when the suture is removed.[3]

Interestingly, the neuronal atrophy, due to the light deprivation, occurs in the brain at the level of the cortex, not the eye. If the suturing is performed in an adult cat, once the visual system has developed, input from that eye will retain its potency. As long as light from the outside is received at the correct point in time, the necessary cascade of proliferation and pruning occurs that provides a stable pathway for sight. If the suturing occurs beyond this time, beyond the critical period, once the circuitry has been formed, glazed, and cured, light remains perceivable through the eye, despite its momentary absence in adulthood.

It is not only the absolute presence of input that matters but also the quality. Rats raised in a simple cage have far fewer connections between neurons in a layer of their cortex than rats raised in "enriched" environments[4] that contain toys and materials of multiple textures. Reciprocally, the brain changes its connectivity during periods of intense creativity that impact an organism's environment such as nest building and tool making.[5]

I work in a lab that studies appetite. Fasting a mouse is probably the most powerful way to motivate them to eat. Mice, born in a lab, are nourished by their mothers for the first three weeks and then weaned into independent life where they typically receive food pellets through a metal grid situated above them. Last year, inexperienced as I was in behavioral experiments, I expected that if I fasted a mouse and the next day placed food pellets on the floor of their cage, they would eat the pellets.

To my astonishment, the mice, even in their highly motivated, fasted state, ignored the food, moved past the food, stepped over the food. How could this be? When the food was presented they reached for the sky. Then it dawned on me—for their entire existence, food had *only* arrived from the sky. In their world, that is where food came from. They could smell the food when I placed it in the cage, but because it didn't come from the sky, they couldn't recognize it as food, even though their lives depended on it. It took a few trials and innate curiosity for them to realize that nourishment could also be found on the ground.

The image of the mice reaching for a foodless sky haunts me frequently. What opportunities am I refusing to see? What is being presented to me in a way that I do not expect or recognize? How has the world I have grown up with hindered my ability to see things as they are? What nourishment is hiding in plain sight? It has been proposed that psychedelics "re-open" closed critical periods enabling us to undergo intense plasticity.[6] Our experience in the world shapes the way we see it, and it takes courage, curiosity, and awareness of this to dare to see things differently and sensitize ourselves to a stimulus we may have never encountered before.

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Leah Kelly is a neuroscientist at Rockefeller University. Her scientific research has been published in *Nature, Nature Neuroscience*, and *Cell Metabolism*. She consults and writes for artists and architects and co-taught the neuroscience seminar "Building Sense" at Columbia GSAPP. Her essay "Sense of Self" appears in *Experience: Culture, Cognition, and the Common Sense.*

Beto Val creates collages that immerse viewers in a surreal yet somehow familiar world full of absurd and eccentric beings. His passion is exploration and play in all its expressions. See his digital work at elbetoval.com and @elbetoval

Opposite page illustration by Sargam Gupta

Leona

by **Mimi Mondal**

After Ronny left, Leona didn't step out of the apartment for two weeks. In another century somebody might've wondered if she died, but now nobody notices you bed-rotting, eating takeaway, watching Netflix for days, clawing the sheets from which his fragrance is fading.

Briarwood's going crazy about some vampire rumor. Social media is flooded with hot takes, although nobody has actually seen a vampire. That's what Ronny would do first. By now he'd have befriended these so-called vampires, interviewed them, published a twenty-page report on the misrepresentation of marginalized monsters.

Fucking Ronny.

She should think about literally anything else, but ten years haven't left Leona with many thoughts that don't feature Ronny. She should radically reinvent her life—as if, at thirty-seven, all eternity is laid out for her, as many lives as she wants. Maybe she's the one in need of meeting some vampires.

"Well, I'm not going to stop seeing Liz."

That's not ethical polyamory, she argues with Ronny in her mind. How's it "ethical" if his primary partner—correction: his *only* partner—refuses to accept this change in their relationship status? But is it cheating if he never really tried to hide it? If Leona wasn't such a coward, she'd have left him first.

She doesn't have any contact for Liz. That girl's too young to have any social overlap with Leona. She looks up her LinkedIn and calls her workplace: the School of International Affairs at the university.

"Hello."

It takes all of Leona's self-control not to hurl the phone at the wall. Ronny's girlfriend's voice is exactly like hers from her twenties. Like some kind of a twisted joke.

That doppelgänger voice sounds surprised to hear from Leona. "Wow—I've no idea where Ronny is! The last time we spoke was, let's see . . . back in February."

Listen you little bitch—

"Listen." Long breath. "You can keep Ronny. I don't care anymore." How long has she needed to get that off her chest? "But can you guys return my dog? I had Sugarbean for years before I met Ronny—she's mine!"

"My god, Sugarbean's missing too?"

"Let's please cut the crap," she snaps. "I just want my damn dog."

"Believe me, Leona, they aren't with me." The girl sounds miserable. "Our relationship wasn't like that. Ronny was always clear that he wouldn't leave you."

And then, her stomach drops.

A whole half-minute later, Liz mumbles, "You've asked his friends?"

Their friends, whom she hasn't spoken to since they collectively replaced her with Liz in their circles.

"Relatives, maybe . . . ?"

None in town.

"He disappeared on March 11, you said? That's six days before, you know—"

Six days before this vampire rumor went viral, but nobody knows how long they might've been around already.

Liz pauses to talk to someone outside, then returns to the call. "Hey, let me give you my number. If you hear anything about Ronny—"

"If I hear anything about my husband," Leona grits her teeth, "I'll take care of it myself."

Read more stories in this series over the course of the year at rubinmuseum.org/spiral

CONNECTING

Buddhism

THE DOTS

An astrologer shares how the field of Tibetan astro-science helps people navigate birth, life, death, and beyond

by Tsering Choezom

Even before the development of a common written language in Tibet, there existed many stories about the stars, lunar mansions, and the world around us that were passed down through generations. These stories reflect the long history of Tibetans taking an interest in studying, understanding, and decoding the environment and celestial objects. As nomadism and farming are the two most common livelihoods in the region, maintaining a close relationship with nature has been central to existence. The field of Tibetan astro-science—consisting of traditional Tibetan astronomy and elemental astrology—began in tandem with the start of Tibetan civilization.

With the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, and later with the translation of the *Kalachakra Tantra* and elemental astrological wisdom from India and China, the development of Tibetan astro-science not only took a great leap but also found its ground in Buddhism. The *Vimalaprabha*, the principal commentary on the *Kalachakra Tantra*, beautifully presents how the effects of planets, lunar mansions, and other aspects function to benefit those who perform virtuous actions. From my forty years of experience studying and practicing in this field, one thing I have come to understand is that Tibetan astro-science was originally presented primarily as a means to help against sicknesses and adversaries that disrupt religious practices leading to the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

One practice that has continued over the last eight hundred years is the publication of the almanac. The development of the almanac has corresponded with practical usage by those living nomadic and farming lifestyles. Along with the positions of celestial objects, the annual almanac provides information regarding the change of seasons, precipitation, cycles of flora and fauna, and favorable days to begin farming. The almanac also includes the seasonal cycle of the bodily channels.

Over the course of centuries many great masters have influenced the development of the almanac, with the most recent and transformative changes happening in the early twentieth century. Owing to these progressive contributions, the almanac is now presented as a tool to understand the world around us more holistically. It reflects the interconnectedness between the external world and the internal, both on macroscopic and microscopic levels. In the language of *Kalachakra*, it is stated, "As is the outside, so is the body. As is the body, so is the other."

The subject of the five elements—encompassing earth, water, air, fire, and space—is discussed heavily in much Tibetan literature. According to Tibetan astro-science, everything is a product of five elements. An understanding of five elements thus holds the key to the study and practice of this discipline. Be it the formation of the universe, present-day existence, or the eventual disintegration or destruction of the universe itself, everything is seen in the context of the balance and imbalance of these elements. Understanding the natural environment, which has greatly contributed to almanac-making, is after all, an understanding of the five elements.

Birth charts are also commonly linked with astro-science. In the Tibetan custom, parents cast a birth chart for their newborn. Astrologers also create marital compatibility charts, medical charts, charts for the deceased, and others. All the charts are based on the celestial positions and astrological functions, which are all understood in the context of the five elements. The Buddha introduced birth, aging, sickness, and death as the four inevitable sufferings, and I sometimes find the marital compatibility chart, birth chart, medical chart, and chart for the deceased can be helpful in alleviating those sufferings.

As parents' health and happiness are crucial to the well-being of a newborn, the Tibetan custom of casting a marital compatibility chart provides help in not only bridging understanding between the couple but also in having a more easeful birth.

As we age, a birth chart acts as a tool to better understand oneself. This chart is not fixed but rather a work in progress. It introduces an individual's capabilities, opportunities, and possibilities, including their strengths and weaknesses, based on their birth details. As in Buddhism, I believe that karmic collection from past lives results in an individual being born to a particular set of parents at a particular time and place.

Medical charts have been increasingly helpful with modern-day health complications and worries. Though such charts were traditionally and more commonly consulted during terminal or chronic illnesses, nowadays people use them on a broader scale. Modern-day lifestyles and challenges have resulted in health conditions where the antidotes advised in the medical charts can be of great benefit along with medications.

The chart for the deceased was originally confined to the Tibetan Buddhist populace. Now with a wider group of people engaged in Tibetan Buddhist practices this type of chart is also finding new grounds. As death is inevitable and the suffering it brings can be overwhelming, the chart for the deceased not only provides help for the deceased in achieving a better rebirth but also offers solace for the remaining family members coping with their loss.

The almanac and these four charts are examples of the means through which Tibetan astro-science provides services to humankind. With everything being a product of five elements, astrologers work to help balance these elements by employing an understanding of celestial objects and other functions of astrology. Standing true to Buddhist philosophy and ideology, Tibetan astro-science draws on the law of causality and the science of interconnectedness.

This Tibetan astrological chart is an auspicious talisman and an instructional tool that is believed to bring good fortune to all those who see, display, or possess it. It integrates astrological, calendrical, and elemental symbols to present options for averting or minimizing negative circumstances, whether internal or external, to attain the best possible outcome.

1. Wheel of Mantras with lotus petals holding seven auspicious symbols interspersed with vajras (symbols of stability)

2. *Kalachakra* mantra comprising ten letters forming one tenfold power symbol

3. Buddha

4. Manjushri (associated with wisdom and knowledge)

5. Padmasambhava

6. Buddha Amoghasiddhi

7. Bodhisattvas and deities of prosperity

8. Gods and divinities associated with worldly success, well-being, and contentment

9. Tortoise (emanation of Manjushri and a metaphor for creation)

10. Tortoise's belly with concentric circles that illustrate, from the inside out, the nine magic numbers, eight trigrams, and twelve animals of the zodiac, which combined with the five elements, form the sixty-year cycle of the Tibetan calendar

11. Symbolic signs or "seals" that serve to protect from obstacles

12. Various protector deities

13. Inscriptions with wishes for good fortune and well-being

14. Inscriptions praising Buddha Amoghasiddhi and the deities depicted here, extolling them to help in obtaining worldly success and well-being

15. Inscriptions with instructions on improving luck while bidding deities, gods, and environmental entities to help avert troubles and obstacles

Painting description by Elena Pakhoutova

Tsering Choezom was born in exile in India. She studied Tibetan astro-science at the Tibetan Medical and Astrological College in Dharamsala. Tsering is the first Tibetan female astro-science practitioner in exile. She has been in the field for forty years and is the head of the Astro-Science Department at Tibetan Medical and Astro Institute, headquartered in Dharamsala. From her first foreign visit in 1995, she has traveled extensively to promote and serve others with her astro-science wisdom.

Protective Astrological Chart; Tibet; late 18th or early 19th century; pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art; gift of Namkha Dorjee/Bodhicitta Art; C2006.71.11

RUBIN

About the Museum

A global museum dedicated to presenting Himalayan art and its insights

Founded in 2004 as a museum in New York City, the Rubin closed its building in 2024 to better serve people across the globe, modeling new possibilities for how museums might reach and engage the public worldwide. Today, the Rubin serves people internationally through exhibitions, participatory experiences, a dynamic digital platform, and partnerships. Inspired and informed by Himalayan art, the Rubin invites people to contemplate the human experience and deepen connections with the world around them in order to expand awareness, enhance well-being, and cultivate compassion. The Rubin advances scholarship through a series of educational initiatives, grants, collection sharing, and the stewardship of a collection of nearly 4,000 Himalayan art objects spanning 1,500 years of history—providing unprecedented access and resources to scholars, artists, and students across the globe.

Sign up for our newsletter: Your gateway to Himalayan art and its insights, with stories and news from the Rubin

Subscribe at rubinmuseum.org/newsletter

About the Collection

Through ongoing research initiatives, exhibitions, scholarly publications, and collection sharing with other museums and institutions, the Rubin cares for, studies, and shares its celebrated collection of Himalayan art.

Collection Sharing

Long-term artwork loans to other institutions expand access to the collection. The Rubin lends to college and university museums without robust Himalayan art collections to promote understanding and encourage education about art created in Tibetan, Nepalese, and culturally related regions. The Rubin also lends to larger museums, bringing greater visibility of these art and cultures to larger and more diverse audiences.

Bodhisattva Kshitigarbha; Tibet; 17th century; gilt copper alloy with pigment; Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art; gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation; F1997.12.4

Projects & Exhibitions The Rubin presents exhibitions, projects, and collaborative initiatives that deepen awareness of Himalayan art and cultures. Often working in partnership with other institutions, the Rubin serves the public locally, nationally, and internationally.

Project Himalayan Art

This interdisciplinary resource for learning about Himalayan, Tibetan, and Inner Asian art and cultures has three parts and is designed to support the inclusion of these subjects into undergraduate teaching on Asia. The project serves students, scholars, teachers, and art enthusiasts nationally and beyond, filling gaps in the learning space.

Publication
Himalayan Art in 108 Objects offers an accessible introduction to Himalayan art as illuminated by a selection of objects from the Neolithic era to today. Over seventy international scholars from different fields and disciplines contextualize the art within religious, social, literary, and material culture.

Traveling Exhibition
Gateway to Himalayan Art is an introduction to the art and cultures of the greater Himalayan region featuring artworks from the Rubin's collection. The nationally traveling exhibition presents the fundamental visual language and meanings of Tibetan Buddhist and other Himalayan art, outlines the materials and techniques used to create such works, and highlights the living practices and intentions behind these objects. The exhibition foregrounds voices from Himalayan communities, including artists, practitioners, and teachers. The exhibition next travels to the Utah Museum of Fine Arts at the University of Utah (February 15–July 27, 2025) and Flaten Art Museum at St. Olaf College, Minnesota (fall 2025).

Digital Platform
Project Himalayan Art is a hub for the study of Himalayan art. It combines materials from the exhibition and publication with multimedia content, such as videos, 360-degree object views, interactive maps, and geography-based narratives, as well as a glossary and teaching resources. These resources contextualize the living ritual, cultural, and art-making practices and traditions of the greater Himalayan region. The site enables teachers to seamlessly source materials for their classes in a range of disciplines and encourages students to do their own extensive research.

Explore Project Himalayan Art at rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart

Photo of *Gateway to Himalayan Art* by Filip Wolak; Artwork: Vajra Scepter; Tibet; 16th century; metalwork; Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art; C2004.31.3

Mandala Lab

The Mandala Lab is a traveling interactive installation that invites people to get curious about their emotions. Inspired by powerful Buddhist principles, the Mandala Lab features five thought-provoking, playful experiences that offer insights into Buddhist teachings to the public for free. It has traveled to Bilbao, London, and Milan, and it continues its European tour in 2025 and beyond.

Photo by Jaclyn Shimkus

Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room at the Brooklyn Museum

Opening summer 2025

Since its debut in 2015, the Shrine Room has been one of the Rubin Museum's most popular installations, providing an immersive experience inspired by a traditional shrine. In June 2025 the Shrine Room travels to the Brooklyn Museum where it will be on view for six years as part of a multiyear collaboration.

Tsiu Marpo; Mongolia; 19th century; wood with mineral pigments; Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art; C2006.18.1

Community Commission with IMAGINE

Opening spring 2025

This partnership with the New York City Department of Transportation Art Program supports the creation of a temporary public artwork in Jackson Heights, Queens, giving New Yorkers broader access to the arts. Nepalese artist IMAGINE (a.k.a. Sneha Shrestha) will design and install a public art piece that celebrates and is inspired by the diverse Himalayan cultures of the neighborhood. The artwork will be displayed for eleven months.

Photo of IMAGINE by Mel Taing

Cultural Preservation and Education in Bhutan with the Bhutan Foundation

This partnership in Bhutan involves working closely with the Wangduechhoeling Palace, the birthplace of Bhutan's monarchy. The Palace will fully open as a museum and cultural center in 2025, focused on Bhutan's history, culture, religion, and craftsmanship. The Rubin will support expertise in content development, visitor experience, and collection management, collaborating with Palace staff and museum professionals in the wider region. The Rubin will co-create in-person workshops and ideation sessions, uniting participants from Bhutan and the Rubin for mutual learning and professional exchange.

Learn more about the Rubin's projects and exhibitions around the world at rubinmuseum.org/projects-exhibitions

Programs The Rubin presents an array of in-person and online programs for adults and families that dive deeper into the art from the Himalayas.

Mindfulness Meditation

Practice the art of attention with the Rubin's in-person and online mindfulness meditation offerings. Every Thursday, join an in-person meditation program at New York Insight Meditation Center in New York City. Each practice is led by an expert teacher and inspired by an artwork in the Rubin's collection of Himalayan art. The sessions are recorded and turned into a weekly podcast so you can practice at home.

Listen wherever you get your podcasts and get tickets for the in-person program at rubinmuseum.org/mindfulness-meditation

Family Programs

The Rubin presents family programs that dive deeper into art and cultures of the Himalayan region. These interactive art workshops integrate Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning® principles. Join us at venues throughout New York City for Sunday afternoon activities both kids and grown-ups will enjoy. Recommended for ages 3 and older with accompanying adults.

To stay up-to-date, sign up at rubinmuseum.org/newsletter

Photo by Filip Wolak

Opportunities for Artists & Scholars

The Rubin celebrates and promotes artistic work and research in Himalayan art through grant opportunities and the Rubin Art Prize.

Grant Program

The Rubin's annual grant program aims to expand awareness and understanding of Himalayan art globally by providing direct support to artists and scholars. The Rubin x Research grant funds scholarship and research into Himalayan art in academic, education, and exhibition contexts. The Rubin x Art Projects grant supports artists whose practices give visibility to the rich cultural legacy and living traditions of Himalayan regions.

Learn more and apply at rubinmuseum.org/grant-program

Rubin Museum Himalayan Art Prize

The Rubin Art Prize is an international award given annually to an artist who is inspired by traditional Himalayan art forms and techniques and the meanings and insights they offer. The vision of the Rubin Art Prize is to support and celebrate the dynamic dialogue between Himalayan art and contemporary life, ensuring that the rich cultural heritage of the greater Himalayan region continues to inspire and resonate globally.

Learn more at rubinmuseum.org/rubin-art-prize

Tenzin Gyurmey Dorjee receiving the inaugural Rubin Art Prize. Photo by Heidi Zeiger

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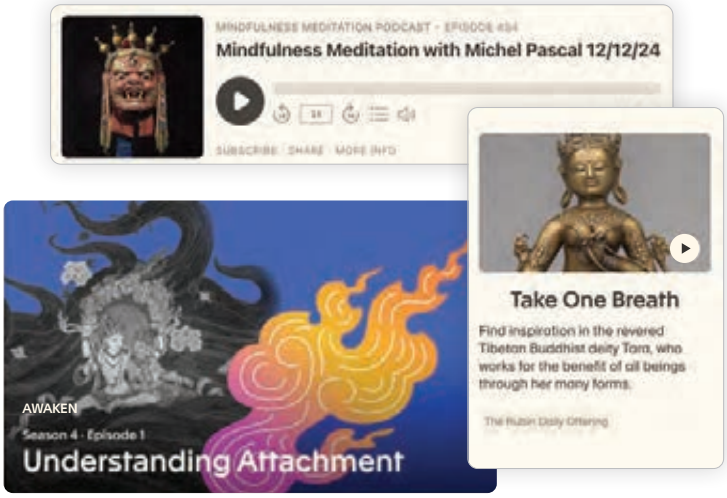
Immerse yourself in even more perspectives at the intersection of art, science, and Himalayan cultures via our expanded online multimedia publication.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Engage with rich multimedia content including written articles, podcasts, video series, photography, animation, and more. *Spiral* provides an engaging experience to help visitors better understand Himalayan art, its cultural context, and the insights illuminated by it. Plus, learn about current news and upcoming events from the Rubin. Visitors can delve deeper into Himalayan art, including the Rubin's collection, or contemplate big questions at the center of our shared human experience. New content is published weekly.

Dive into more of *Spiral* at rubinmmuseum.org/spiral

You Make It Possible The Rubin is making more of an impact than ever before, as we bring our work to communities across the United States and the world. We rely on our generous and thoughtful supporters and need your help to promote understanding and appreciation of Himalayan art and cultures, as well as offer inspiring and meaningful experiences to people of all ages and backgrounds.

Make a donation

Donate any amount and become a Friend of the Rubin—a group of supporters who champion the Rubin's mission to celebrate and present Himalayan art and its insights with diverse audiences around the globe. Your support as a Friend provides essential funding for the Rubin's projects and exhibitions that cultivate understanding, enhance well-being, and empower the next generation of artists and scholars.

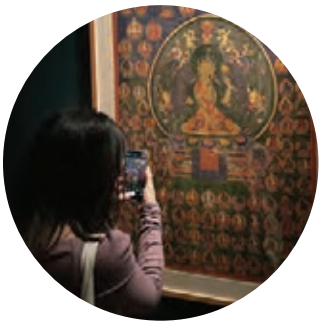
Give a major gift

Donations of $5,000 and above enable you to align your philanthropy and passion with generous support for the Rubin's annual programs, traveling exhibitions, scholarly work, education, and multiyear initiatives. Your contribution plays a vital role in helping us reach goals such as amplifying the work of living artists and bringing arts education and social emotional learning to students in New York City and beyond.

Connect us to your philanthropic organization

Foundation and corporation giving is essential to our ability to have long-term impact in the world. We invite connections to your philanthropic organizations. Corporate Sponsorship, starting at $10,000, offers alignment with your social responsibility strategy and brings benefits for employees and your company.

Learn more at rubinmuseum.org/support



Above: photo by KJ Bowen; Below: photo by Liz Ligon of the opening night of *Reimagine: Himalayan Art Now*

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